

Arriving at a Crossroads

Third Sunday of Easter

May 4, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages

Joshua 1:9(NRSV)

"I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."

Ephesians 2:19-22(NRSV)

¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Going forward with God

After Moses' death, Joshua brought the Israelites to the border of Canaan, the land which God had long before promised to Abraham and his descendents. They had been there before. Forty years earlier, Moses and the people had arrived at the border only to turn back, fearing the people who lived in Canaan and not trusting in God's promises of success. But now, after wandering the wilderness for forty years, God's people had returned. Knowing he would never enter Canaan himself, Moses had reminded the people of their heritage and how God had saved them from slavery in Egypt. He had reiterated God's covenant with them. Moses knew that the people had to honor their past before moving forward with their future.¹

Knowing their fear of Canaan and the unknown, God spoke plainly to Joshua. In the space of seven verses, three times God said to him, "be strong and courageous" (Joshua 1:2-9). The conquest that Joshua and the people were about to undertake was to be God's work. He would lead them. He would not fail them or forsake them. So long as they lived as God's people, walking in the ways he had taught them, faithful to the covenant, they need not be fearful or frightened. Simply put, they were utterly to trust the infinitely trustworthy God!

In the long history of God's people, there have been many such crucial moments. We, the congregation of St. Andrew UMC, have arrived at a crossroads of our own. Soon, we will literally cross the creek to occupy our beautifully sacred new sanctuary. Will we fear the inevitable changes or will we move forward with hope and confidence? So long as we continue striving to be faithful to God, loving him and loving neighbor, trusting and obeying, we will continue to grow. We will grow in our own discipleship and we will grow in numbers as we invite others into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another.

Ephesus

Ephesus was a major port city on the western shore of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). In the first century, Ephesus' population was about 250,000, making it the third-largest city in the Roman Empire, after Rome and Alexandria. Though Paul did not found the Christian church in Ephesus, he lived and worked there for nearly three years (see Acts 19).

You can visit the ruins in Ephesus today, though it is now about seven miles inland. The ancient city of Ephesus is one of the best preserved in the world. You can walk the streets Paul walked and stand outside the library where he preached. You can still see ancient Roman drainage pipes in the streets and colorful mosaics in homes!

Ironically, the NT Letter to the Ephesians was probably *not* written specifically to the Christians in Ephesus! The phrase "in Ephesus" in v.1 is missing from the earliest manuscripts and was probably added later. It seems that the letter was actually written to be circulated among many churches in Asia Minor.

¹ Much of the book of Deuteronomy can be read as Moses' final speech to the Hebrews. Philip Yancey does a great job of telling this story in his book on the Old Testament, *The Bible Jesus Read*, Zondervan, 1999.

But what is the church?

It is easy for us to forget where we've come from. Americans like to look ahead, not back. Yet, as we move into our new sanctuary, we need to take the time to honor where we've been. To remember that we have always strived to be a congregation noted for our warmth and friendliness, for our desire to connect with others so we can all better connect with God.

Similarly, in today's passage from Ephesians, Paul² reminded Gentile Christians³ of who they are now that they have come to faith in Jesus Christ. So he writes "remember . . . remember that you were at one time without Christ" (2:11-12). But now, God has created "one new humanity" (v. 15) bringing together both

Did Paul write Ephesians?

Perhaps. Perhaps not. It may surprise you to learn that this question even comes up. After all, the first words of Ephesians clearly attribute the letter to Paul (v. 1). But there are good reasons to believe that this letter was penned by one of Paul's followers, rather than Paul himself. For example, in several places the writer seems to have no first-hand knowledge of the church in Ephesus even though Paul spent three years there (see 1:15; 3:2; 4:21). There are no greetings to people Paul would surely have known. In addition, the style and grammar of the letter are dramatically different from letters we know Paul personally wrote, such as Romans and Galatians.

So . . . if Paul didn't write the letter, is it a lie? No! In the Greco-Roman first-century world, if a person wrote to convey the thoughts or teachings of another, then the writing was to be attributed to the teacher! Doing otherwise would have been considered dishonest. It is a little like this. If I had spent a couple of weeks with Robert Hasley in the first-century and then written you a letter to pass on what I had learned from him, you would have expected the letter to bear Robert's name, not mine. The letter would have contained his teachings, not mine. This isn't how we do things in our world, but it does make some sense! The early church accepted the Letter to the Ephesians as the authentic and inspired teachings of Paul the Apostle.

Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians "to God in one body through the cross" (v. 16). Thus, the Gentile Christians were no longer "strangers and aliens" (v. 19), but citizens in God's kingdom and full "members of the household of God."

This "household of God" is the church ~ not buildings, not even new sanctuaries. Rather, in Paul's rich imagery, those who have faith in Jesus Christ are the church, which is built on the work and words of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone⁴ of it all. When we rise each week to recite the Apostles Creed and affirm our belief in "one holy catholic⁵ church," we mean the universal church, the body of Christ, the household of God - to which *all* Christians, *all* those who have faith in Jesus Christ, belong.

To hear the power in Paul's words in this passage, we need to remember that the Temple in Jerusalem was seen by the Jews to be God's dwelling place with them. God's presence, his Spirit,⁶ had dwelt in the Temple, but had left because of the people's unfaithfulness to the covenant (see Ezekiel 10). But now, Paul writes, it is the people of God themselves who are joined together in Christ - a new creation, a new humanity ~ growing into a holy temple, the temple to which God's Spirit has returned. What a remarkable claim we make, that God's very presence dwells in us, the church, the people of God. Truly, God has been with us. God is with us now. God will be with us.

Many people will come to St. Andrew to see the beauty and sacredness expressed in our new sanctuary. But they will want more. When they come, they will want to feel the presence of God. They will want to see the church living out its faith - kindness, love, patience, service to others, and so on. They will want to see the relevance of the faith for their lives.⁷

With God's help, we will not disappoint them.

² Though Paul may not have penned this letter, it is still appropriate (and easier!) to refer to him as the author.

³ All the first Christians were Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah and placed their faith in him. As Paul carried the Gospel across the Roman Empire, increasing numbers of Gentiles (non-Jews) became Christians also.

⁴ In the Greek, it isn't clear whether Paul is referring to Jesus as the "cornerstone" of the structure, placed on the foundation to ensure that the structure is built true, or a "keystone," placed on the top of a building in an exalted position. Frankly, either one works for me!

⁵ In the Creed, the word "catholic" does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church, but simply means "universal."

⁶ See Isaiah 63:9-14. In this crucial passage, God's presence with his people is equated with God's Holy Spirit.

⁷ From the research of George Barna, a leading pollster and researcher for Christian churches and organizations.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Joshua 1 God speaks to Joshua, who instructs the officers of the camp.</p>	<p>Day 2 Isaiah 63:9-14 God's Holy Spirit is God's presence with his people.</p>
<p>Day 3 1 Corinthians 3:10-17 God's temple is the church; the "you" is the church in Corinth.</p>	<p>Day 4 Ephesians 2:11-22 A single new humanity</p>
<p>Day 5 Ephesians 4:1-16 An appeal to the church to be unified in its diversity.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

A growing archive of these studies is available on-line

There are now more than thirty sermon background studies available on-line. You can get to them by going to our Center for Christian Learning website at www.standrewccl.org. Simply click on "Sermon Background Studies" and you'll be taken to the correct page. You can also get there by going to the church's website, www.standrewumc.org, and clicking on the link to the current study. Once you are at the Center's website you can also join the e-mail distribution list for the studies. You'll then get a weekly e-mail with the latest background study attached.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. *We are* the church. We don't do church. We don't go to church. Rather, we are called to *be* the church. We aren't even called to become the church. Instead, we are called to live out what we already are! Regrettably, many people have poor feelings about the church. How many times have you heard someone say, "I don't need church, all I need is Jesus." Sorry. The people of God, those who have faith in Jesus Christ, are the church – whether we like it or not! We are called into the community of believers. How do we help people overcome their reluctance to join a church? How do we help people grasp the reality of God's presence with us? What role has church played in your own life? Notice I didn't ask about your faith, but about your church.
2. Many Christians are consumed with the supposed "do's and don'ts" of the Christian life. We simply insist upon making the Bible into a book of right behavior. Because Paul's letters are so filled with Paul's instructions to early churches, many Christians turn Paul into the king of the rulemakers. This is most unfortunate! Paul's instruction to the struggling Christians in these new churches is simple. He reminded them that they were new creations, born from above, indwelt by God's Holy Spirit – and they ought to act like! As far as the do's and don'ts – do whatever builds up the church and is a good witness to others; avoid whatever tears down the church or is a bad witness to others. Examine your own list of favorite do's and don'ts. Using Paul's criteria, what stays on the list and what goes? Why? How might Paul's perspective reshape our own thoughts on Christian behavior? Do you think that Paul might be telling us that so long as we are in private – anything goes? If not, why not? If so, read Philippians 4:8-9. How might Paul's teaching affect the church?