

March 20, 2011
Second Sunday in Lent

The National Presbyterian Church

Beginnings and Blessings

The Epistle to the Ephesians 1:1-14

Rev. Patrick J. Willson

Here I am; and there you are.

Here I am, and there you are. This morning we are to each other at least the first installment on answering the question “What’s he like?”—and “What are they like?”

Here I am, a provisional and exceedingly ambiguous answer to the question of “What’s he like?” People wonder, “What’s he like?” On this particular morning there is also the question of “What will he say?”

Here I am, and there you are, strangers to each other, and what, we wonder, can we possibly say to each other that might matter at this moment.

What can we say? One might reasonably assume that since I am a preacher I am fairly bursting with things I want to say, but as a matter of fact, what I hope for our time together is listening. It is important for interim pastors to listen. I want to listen to your staff; I want to listen to your

elders; I want to listen to the members of your search committees; I want to listen to you. On Sunday mornings you may return the favor listening to me. But what can I say here by way of beginning?

Isn't this the way it is? We come to these vastly important moments in our lives and we don't quite know what to say. At the most important times of our lives we find ourselves at a loss for words.

We fall in love. At first the words come quickly, easily; we are never done with talking to the one we love; we have so much to say and the words don't matter much. "I love you," someone says, and the beloved says "I love you"; "I love you"; "I love you." That can go on for a while. While that true and right, we want to say something more. We know how evanescent feelings of love are, and we want to say something more powerful and resilient than just how we feel.

So we come to church, and the church gives us words: "I take you... and I promise to be your loving and faithful [spouse] in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health as long as we both shall live." Those are not the words we would have thought of, but when we seek to anchor a relationship in something more substantial than our own feelings, these are the words we seek to declare ourselves. We come to church to find words like these.

Or to speak of less happy circumstances: there is a death in your neighborhood. We never know what to say. At a loss for words we bake a casserole or a pound cake. Somewhere in the Scriptures, though I'm not sure where, it is recorded that a casserole or pound cake is what is called for at such a time. We do what we can and we deliver our gifts to our neighbor with such words of comfort and reassurance as we can muster but which inevitably feel too small and too frail in the face of such loss.

But what we can do when our neighbor has more than 8,000 deaths, another 11,000 people missing, more than 400,000 homeless and heaven only knows how many threatened by nuclear radiation? Well, we take up an offering to support the relief efforts, as Pastor Doug Learned told you earlier—we do what we humanly can. We remember the gracious and generous relief response Japan provided when our Gulf Coast was hammered by Hurricane Katrina, and we want our response to be similarly gracious and generous. Earlier this week Pastor Doug Learned sent a letter across the street to the Ambassador of Japan saying that at National Presbyterian Church “we want you to know that as your friends and neighbors, we hold you in our thoughts and prayers.” If you drove in on Nebraska Avenue this morning you might have noted that the flag of Japan is at half-mast. On this side of Nebraska Avenue in the house of God our hearts are at half-mast sharing in some small way Japan’s loss and suffering. In our worship we will be praying for people of Japan.

I imagine someone protesting, “You’re going to pray for Japan? Is that the best you Christians can do?”

It does seem so little in the face of such overwhelming tragedy and threat, but if we are not discouraged by such protests we give the matter some thought, and we come to recognize: yes, that is indeed the best we can do.

Humanly speaking there is so little we can do. This week *The New York Times* featured an online discussion regarding “What aid makes sense for Japan?” More than 120 nations have offered relief assistance, but *The Times* reminds us “Japan is the third-largest economy in the world. No country is more technologically advanced, and its people are highly educated and skilled. It was as prepared as any nation could have been for a devastating earthquake and tsunami.”ⁱ Many commentators have noted

the courage, resilience and ingenuity of the Japanese people. Our hearts ache for those workers who dare the hazards of radiation trying to control the threat of damaged nuclear reactors. Television news commentators have repeatedly spoken of their work as “a suicide mission.” Here in our worship we discover we have a better way of describing that: Jesus told us, “Greater love has no one than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Humanly speaking people are doing what we can.

Yet we can do more. We come to church and note the words from the 90th psalm carved around the Fountain Garden, “Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations,” a psalm that ends with the prayer, “Establish thou the work of our hands, the work of our hands, establish thou it,” which is to say, “Lord take what we can humanly do and let it make a difference. Bless it.”

We come to church and hear of an unshakable foundation:

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble....
though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of
the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its
tumult.[Ps. 46:1-3]

Though the geology of the earth we thought so immovable has cracked and flooded, “God is our refuge and strength,” an unshakable “help in trouble.” We scarcely know what to do with words so buoyant and confident in their hope. For words such as these we come to church. When life and death leaves us speechless, we come to church for the words. The church has a ministry of words.

Think of the church, if you will, as a great rehearsal hall.ⁱⁱ This is where we learn our parts and practice our

lines so we may become the kind of characters we want to play in the drama of life in Jesus Christ.. It seems awkward at first, this rote repetition. “The Lord be with you,” we say, and respond: “And also with you.” We bless one another. It is not easy to bless one another. Here, in the sanctuary, we frame our lips to pronounce a proper blessing. “The Lord be with you”; “And also with you.” If we get the words right, perhaps the rest of us will follow: our hearts, arms, legs, hands all reaching out to bless. It is not easy. It is an awkward business.

Our awkwardness evidences our embarrassment at trying to give each other what we want so badly to give but what we do not ourselves possess? I mean, really now! “The Lord be with you”—as if with a handful of words I could package up God and hand over the power that shaped the stars and sun. “God bless you,” we say, but we wonder. We would bless you if we were God, but we are not God, and we wonder what stands behind such words,. We wonder if such words matter at all.

Strangely, however, we do not wonder at the power of the curse. Though we may doubt our ability to bless one another we do not for an instant doubt our power to hurt each other with words. You come to the end of your patience with a child and you blast him with words you would never in your life use otherwise, and instantly you see the shock and dismay in his eyes. We do not doubt our power to curse each other. But power to bless? We wonder.

We have heard rumor of a power to bless, however, and we come to church not only to get the words right but to see if it is so. Is there anything, anyone who desires to bless us beyond our best intentions? We wonder.

We come here for the words and power to make them stick, and on this Sunday of beginnings we listen to the Epistle to the Ephesians.

The Apostle is beginning the letter. That's good. We want to know how to begin. How do we begin truly and well? Listen to how the Apostle begins.

Here I am, he says: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God."

And there you are: "the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus."

Then, of all the things he might possibly say, the Apostle blesses them: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, because that is the way the Apostle Paul begins every letter. Grace to you and peace seems to be the way most early Christian letters began. Grace to you and peace, because that is what we Christians are given to say to one another.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, because given the way our world is, there is not much grace and even less of peace, and if we are to find any grace and peace at all it will be from no where else but God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to you and peace, because that is what the world so desperately wants and needs and hopes and dreams. Grace to you and peace, though we wonder if the words are only a dream.

Grace to you and peace, says the Apostle, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Then, because we wonder about this beginning, the Apostle takes us back to the beginning of all things and describes the inheritance laid up for us in the grace and peace of God.

Grace to you and peace, above all, says the Apostle, because that is what God has intended from the very beginning of everything. "Before the foundation of the world," God chose us in Christ to be "holy and blameless

before God in love”—to be a blessing—“God destined us for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ.”

The cosmos, the whole creation is not some happenstance accident but rather moves inexorably in the direction of God's desire to bless. The world is not what we make of it, but the theatre where the drama of God's blessing takes place. We are not our own, as if we had to fabricate a script to make sense of our lives; rather our characters are shaped to be a blessing. This is our vocation, our calling, as human beings; it is the vocation we embrace in baptism. In Christ, we human creatures glimpse how to bless one another. “In Christ,” the Apostle assures us, “God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” In Christ we see God's will to bless.

Grace to you and peace, then, says the Apostle, because that is God's plan. God's agenda is grace and peace, says the Apostle, is “a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.”

Grace to you and peace, because grace and peace are the shape of future. Much around us causes us to wonder if grace and peace are anything more than words. We see wars and terrible tragedy. We hear bitter words; words small and mean words; words hurting, and words distorting human life. But grace to you and peace, anyway, because everything that is not grace and peace is as doomed as the dinosaurs. We have peeked at the last chapters of the book and we know how the drama ends: God's grace and peace are triumphant, and everything that is not grace and peace fades away in the bright light of God's victory.

Grace to you and peace, because of all the wonderful things we hope for one another, grace and peace are by far the most extravagant and most magnificent. Grace to you and peace, because that is the best God gives us to offer each other. Grace to you and peace, we say to

this city of Washington, DC and its suburbs. Grace to you and peace we say to our neighbors at NBC and Homeland Security and the Embassy of Japan. There is no point in a great building like this, no point at all, except somehow to articulate God's will to bless. Grace to you and peace, this place says to the nation, to people driving by on Nebraska Avenue, to students from American University walking or jogging by, to tourists wandering in.

That is our business as a church: to speak God's blessing: Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ—we say it to one and to all, to anyone who will listen; we say even it to people who will not listen and refuse to believe even the possibility of grace and peace.

We look forward to the day when the whole world will be gathered into the grace and peace of God. Today we gather together under God's blessing, you and I, to begin this covenant relationship. What can we say to one another? What can we say other than the words God gives us to say: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.*

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ⁱ “What Aid Makes Sense for Japan?” *The New York Times*,
<http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/03/15/what-aid-makes-sense-for-japan?scp=3&sq=aid%20to%20japan&st=cse>

ⁱⁱ In this section I am indebted to Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005) and James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).