

Text: Ephesians 1:1-2

Title: “Navigating An Alternative Reading of Reality” (Introducing a year-long series in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians)

Last Thursday morning; three days ago now, I acquired a new set of glasses. The young woman who helped me select the new frames said they made me look younger. What do you think? She also said that the new color of the rims matched my skin tone better. She had been well trained!

I have needed new glasses for some time. For the past four or five months, I have struggled to see clearly. As I have turned my head in different directions, it has been taking too long for things to come into focus. Especially when reading...which I do a lot! And while preaching!! As I would look out at you all...and then look down at my notes...it was taking far too long time to find the words on the page. And then when I looked up at you again...it was taking what felt like a long time to see your face.

But now! I can see both your faces and my notes!! Clearly! Without having to strain! Thank you, Lord!

Which clearly is what the New Testament document we refer to as “Ephesians” does for us. It helps us to see. It enables us to see clearly. It is what all of Holy Scripture does, or at least, is designed to do. But nowhere more effectively, for me, than in the letter the apostle Paul writes to the disciples of Jesus living in the first century city of Ephesus.

It is, after all, what he tells us he is praying for: “I pray that the eyes of the heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and that is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.” (1:18-19a). Paul, and the Spirit of God Who is inspiring Paul, wants us to see...clearly...without having to strain. Thank you, Lord!

In the letter to the Ephesians, written about 62 AD, we are given a new set of glasses. Or, to put it in contemporary terms, in the letter we are given an alternative reading of reality. I owe the phrase to Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman: “alternative reading of reality”. In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle of Jesus Christ gives us an alternative reading of reality. An alternative reading shaped by “the Gospel of your salvation” as Paul calls it (1:13). An alternative reading shaped by Christmas and Good Friday and Easter and the Ascension and Pentecost.

And more than an alternative reading, in the letter to the Ephesians, through the letter to the Ephesians, we are slowly, but surely, drawn into the alternative reality itself. Slowly, but surely, we realize that we are not only seeing things differently...things really are different. “Things are not as they seem,” Paul is saying to us. Or, more precisely, “Things are not only as they seem.” There is more to reality than meets our unaided senses and emotions and intellect...a whole lot more! And no other book of the Bible, except the last book, the Revelation of Jesus Christ, opens up that more as expansively and concretely as does the letter from a prison cell we call “Ephesians”.

And so, I invite you to come with me on an adventure into an alternative reading of reality.

Our text today is the first two verses of the letter, Ephesians 1:1-2, Paul's opening greeting. But I want to also read the verses that immediately follow, giving us a taste of what is to come.

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are at Ephesus, and who are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundations of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love, He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which 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, which He lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth.

In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation – having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory."

Prayer: Living God, We believe that you got a hold of Paul, that you enabled him to think these massively expansive thoughts and to write them down for us. I pray now in your mercy and grace that You would help us not only understand these words but You would help us actually live into the reality these words are describing as never before. For we pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Here is how I would like to proceed today. I want to focus in turn on Paul, then on Ephesus, then on Paul and Ephesus, and then on the opening greeting. Who is this man Paul? What was life like in Ephesus? What is the connection between Paul and Ephesus? And how does Paul set the stage for his...for the Gospel's...alternative reading of reality? Paul. Ephesus. Paul and Ephesus...The opening greeting.

But first, a word about the little phrase "at Ephesus"; "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints that are at Ephesus". You may know that many manuscripts of the letter do not contain that little the phrase "at Ephesus". Scholars have different opinions as to why. Here is what I think. Paul's original letter, the first manuscript if you will, had the address "at Ephesus"; he sent the letter to his friends in the city of Ephesus. But people quickly realized, that although Paul was writing to the specific people of that specific church in that specific city, he was also speaking more widely, to all the churches in the areas around Ephesus. Which explains why, unlike

Paul's other letters, he does not greet people by name and is not addressing any particular problem. People soon realized that the letter to the Ephesians is really Paul's letter to the churches...any where and everywhere. The letter is a kind of encyclical to the whole church of Jesus Christ in the world. So, I think that when those who copied these manuscripts to pass them onto other churches, they realized that it belonged to other churches and they just left out the "at Ephesus". So soon after the letter reached Ephesus, those who made copies for other churches dropped "at Ephesus".

Paul. Ephesus. Paul and Ephesus and the opening greeting.

Which means we can insert in the "at Ephesus" slot "to the saints at Laodecea", "to the saints at Athens", "to the saints at Rome", "to the saints in Hong King" and Seoul, Rio de Janeiro, and Brisbane, and Tucson and "to the saints at Vancouver". The letter is also addressed to us!

A. Paul. What do we need to know about this man as we make our own way through Ephesians?

Paul is the name given to him after his encounter with Jesus. He was born Saul, in honor of Israel's first King. He was born early in the first century BC, a few years after the birth of Jesus of Nazareth somewhere between 5 and 10 AD. He was born to Jewish parents who happened to also be Roman Citizens, which meant he then was born with this unspeakable privilege of citizenship in the Roman Empire, which became very important later in his life. He was born in the city of Tarsus, in Cilicia in an area that is now modern-day Turkey.

Tarsus was "a university town" known as a centre of learning. Pythagoras spent time there. So too Parmenides and Zeno and Democritus. Tarsus was a multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-religion city. Jews, Greeks, Romans all lived and worked and worshiped there. In the early years of the first century, Tarsus had a population of nearly 500,000! Meaning that from the beginning of his life, Saul / Paul lived and worked in an urban world in a world like our world. He understands where we live. He understands an urban world!

At some point in his late childhood, his family moved to Jerusalem; at least, "they made many long-term visits to the Holy City. In Jerusalem, Saul became a student of the Rabbi Gamaliel (acts 5:33-42; 22:3), grandson and successor of Rabbi Hillel (60BC-20AD), one of Judaism's greatest thinkers and teachers. Saul was an excellent student, rising to the top of his class, rising in the ranks of the scholarly Pharisees. He was in such high ranks that when the first Christians were brought to trial, Saul was in a position to be able to cast votes for their punishment. (Acts 26:10)

It's important to realize that Saul / Paul's first response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ was horror, not belief, not joy, but horror. Christ crucified? The Messiah...crucified? No way. Heresy! Blasphemy! And then risen from the dead? No way! Nonsense. So problematic did he find the Gospel that he decided it must be stamped out. Those who preached such "blasphemy" and "nonsense" must be destroyed.

He was on his way to the city of Damascus, capital of modern day Syria to arrest disciples of "The Way" as they were then called and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial and then punishment. Around noon one day "suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him". That is how Luke the medical doctor tells the story in his "Acts of the Apostles". "Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him" (Acts 9:3). Saul fell to the ground. So would I! So would you! And he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). "Who are you, Lord?" Saul cried out. And the voice says "I am Jesus, who you are persecuting" (9:5). And Saul became Paul, the greatest of all Christian thinkers and missionaries.

In that Damascus encounter, Paul discovers grace. He hated the name Jesus. He hated all who named His name. He was out to erase the name from the pages of history. And yet, Jesus chose to love Paul; Jesus chose to love this man, to make Paul one of His chosen ambassadors (6:19). Grace! Sheer grace!

In that Damascus encounter, Paul discovers that Jesus is alive; the crucified One really is alive. The news from Jerusalem's cemetery is not nonsense...Jesus is risen!

In that encounter, Paul discovers that Jesus is, therefore, Lord. Paul's first word to Jesus is "Lord". Paul new the meaning of the word he used. Kurios. The word used to refer to Israel's God, Yahweh. The word used to refer to Rome's Emperor, Caesar. Kurios. Lord. Jesus is Lord.

And in that encounter, Paul discovers the wonder of being the church. "Why are you persecuting me? Jesus asks. "Me?" Was Paul persecuting Jesus? He was threatening and harming disciple of Jesus, yes. But Jesus? Yes! For what we do to Jesus' disciples, we somehow do to Jesus. Jesus' disciples make up Jesus' Body in the world. What we do to Jesus' body, we do to Jesus.

From that day on the Damascus road, Paul was a Jesus-captured man. A Jesus-apprehended man. A Jesus-enthralled man (Philippians 3:7-14). And a Jesus-sent man.

Thus the word "apostle". "Paul, an apostle of Messiah Jesus". That is how he introduced himself the rest of his life. "Apostle". Sent one. Authorized by the Sender to speak on behalf of the Sender. "Apostle of Messiah Jesus". One of the greatest privileges any human being can ever have. Sent by the Messiah, sent by the Kurios, to speak the Messiah's message, the Kurios' message to the world. Paul the persecutor, the terrorist, becomes as N. T. Wright puts it, "the greatest interpreter of the mind of Jesus ever to live."

Paul.

B. Ephesus. What do we need to know about Ephesus to make our way through "Ephesians"?

Ephesus is located almost 4 miles inland from the Aegean Sea, on the west coast of modern Turkey. Years before it had been a seaport, but over the decades, silt from the Cayster river slowly forced people to move inland. At the time when the gospel arrived

in Ephesus, it had a population of between 225,000-250,000. Again, from the beginning of the Christian era believers have lived the Gospel in urban centers.

Ephesus was called “the first and grandest metropolis of Asia”, ranking in importance in the Empire only behind Athens and Rome. It was the largest trading center in Asia Minor, largely due to the fact that it was situated along major shipping routes. The so-called “Royal Road” went through the city, linking East and West. And bringing into the city people from all over the world. People with all kinds of differing philosophical and religious perspectives. All kinds of alternative readings of reality.

The city had a fabulous theatre...with a seating capacity of 24,000! It was so acoustically engineered that a speaker standing at a particular spot on the stage need only whisper to be heard by all 24,000. I have experienced the phenomenon myself, at a similar theater in Baalbek in the Bekka Valley in Lebanon.

The city also had a massive temple, built for the worshiping of the goddess Artemis as the Greeks called her or Diana, as the Romans called her. She was the goddess of sexual fertility who is represented by a statue with many breasts. Her temple was 69 meters wide, 130 meters long; 275 feet wide by 425 feet long, with 127 columns, and 18 meters (60 feet) high; 2 meters (6 feet) in diameter. It was larger than any modern-day football field, NFL or CFL. Larger than BC place. Larger than the largest stadium today in Dallas, Texas. It was four times larger than the Parthenon in Athens! Making it the “largest building known in antiquity” (Harold Hoehner, 83). One of the “seven wonders of the world.”

Understandably life in Ephesus “revolved around” (Hoehner) the temple of Artemis/Diana. She was actually spoken of as “the wife of Ephesus”, the city’s “protectress and nourisher” (Hoehner).

Is this why Paul speaks so much of “temple” in his letter to the Ephesians? Is this part of the reason why he speaks of the relationship between Jesus and His church in terms of a husband and a wife?

Ephesus was especially known as a center for magical practices. One scholar says that the city was “obsessed with demons and magic” (Frank Thielman, 20). People, therefore, talked a lot about spiritual power. Indeed, the goddess Artemis/Diana was thought to be the goddess of power. She was thought to be one of the most powerful of all deities and was sought out for defense against other opposing “powers” and “spirits”. Is this why Paul speaks so often of “principalities and powers” in his letter to the Ephesians? “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know...what is the surprising greatness of Gods’ power toward us as believers...in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly place, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion...” (1:18, 19-21a).

“Our struggle”, he reminds the Ephesians, “is not against flesh and blood,” not against other human beings, “but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world force of this darkness, against the special forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (6:12).

One more thing to know about Ephesus. It was proudly a center of the so-called “Imperial Cult”, the worship of the Roman Emperor. Worship of Caesar as a god was the glue that held society together, it “permeated all levels of society” (Thielman, 21). So the city constructed another temple (between 11-13 AD) and dedicated it to “...Emperor Caesar Augustus, Son of God”. Caesar Augustus was being worshiped as the warrior god who had imposed unity and order on the world. The rule of Augustus was thought to be so significant that the calendar needed to be changed. In 9BC the Ephesian City Council voted to change the calendar to begin on Augustus’ birthday. It was claimed that Augustus had ended the time of suffering and that, as a city proconsul (Paullus Fabius Maximus) announced, Augustus had “restored the form of all things to usefulness”. The decree spoke of Augustus as a “savior”, *soter*, and as a “god”, *theos*.

And his birthday was “the beginning of good tidings to the world”. The word is *euangelion*, or *evangel*, which we refer to in English as “gospel”. The birth and reign of Caesar Augustus was the beginning of the gospel for the cosmos. What had come to the world in Augustus was an eternal reign of peace.

See why I use the phrase “alternative reading of reality”? The people in Ephesus who came to faith in Jesus Christ will have a new understanding of “Gospel”, a different “glad tidings”. With a new understanding of power and authority and unity and relationship and time.

Ephesus.

C. Paul and Ephesus.

Paul lived and served in Ephesus on two different occasions. The first time in 52 AD was quite brief (Acts 18:19-21); the second time in 53-56 AD lasted about two and a half years (Acts 19:8-22; 20:31). At first, Paul taught and dialogued in the synagogue (Acts 19:8). But then he began to come up against “hardened hearts”, as Luke puts it in Acts, Paul worked out of “the school of Tryrannus” (19:9). Apparently one of the Ephesian philosophers did not need his meeting room part of the day, and made it available to Paul. Luke tells us that Paul met with people every day in the Hall of Tryrannus for two years, teaching every single day for over two years.

During his two-and one-half year stay in the city, many people were won to Jesus and His Gospel. And as a sign of their genuine conversion and intent to be Jesus disciples, “people broke with the Ephesian obsession with magic and the occult”. Many then brought their magic and occult books together, and burned them in a public square. Luke says that they counted up the price of the books: 50,000 pieces of silver, the equivalent of 50,000 days wages! The Gospel broke through...and freed people from deceptive and oppressive lives.

Paul’s preaching of the Gospel also spoke into the obsession with Artemis/Diana. The silversmiths of the city made much of their living crafting dolls with many breasts used in the worship of the goddess of sexual fertility. As people were won to Jesus and His Gospel, sales of the dolls fell dramatically. One of the silversmiths, a certain Demetrius, was so incensed that he stirred up a riot. Luke says the city was thrown into confusion

(Acts 19:29), and people rushed to the theatre dragging some of Paul's companions with them. Cooler heads prevailed, and no one was killed. But the city was never the same. The Gospel always starts fiddling with the idols around which a city revolves.

Paul then left Ephesus. Two years later, he ended up in jail. And lived as a prisoner for five years! First in Caesarea, along the coast of Syria and then after a harrowing trip by sea, in Rome. From Rome, in 62 AD, Paul writes his letters to the Ephesians. "I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus, for the sake of you Gentiles" (3:1). "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, exhort you to walk in a manner worthy of the call to which you have been called" (4:1). Note: not "prisoner of Caesar". But "prisoner of the Lord...of Messiah Jesus". An alternative reading of one's own reality!

D. Now the opening greeting.

Paul begins by reminding the Ephesians of who they are. He calls them "saints", holy ones. And he calls them "believers". "Saints" does not mean "perfect ones", at least not yet! "Saints" simply means "set-apart ones". Something is made holy by the Holy God by simply God claiming it for his own and setting it apart for His own purpose. Paul reminds the Ephesians right from the start of the letter that the Holy God has grabbed hold of them and set them apart for His redemptive purposes in the world. Put on Ephesian glasses: We discover that you and I are "holy ones"!

Paul reminds the Ephesians where they live. Yes, in Ephesus. But more essentially "in Christ". "Believers in Christ", he says. "In Christ." Paul will use that phrase or it's equivalent 36 times in this letter because it's the essence of his practical theology. In Christ, we live and move. We have our being in Christ. Put Ephesian glasses on and you and I discover we have a new address! In Christ!

Paul reminds the Ephesians what has been given to them. "Grace to you" ... and "peace". Grace and peace. In Christ set-apart saints have been given grace and peace. Saints receive grace and peace. Grace – unmerited favor. Something we could never earn. Nothing we need to earn. God's free choice to be wholly disposed toward us for good. Peace – well-being. Soundness, wholeness. Shalom, as Paul would have said it in person.

The word "grace" would especially ring cords in the souls of Gentiles since the greeting "grace to you" was a common Greek and Roman greeting. The word "peace" would ring chords in the world of Jews because "peace" was the normal greeting for Hebrews. "Grace and peace" to you. A multi-cultured greeting for a multi-cultured people. Put on Ephesian glasses: you and I are recipients of God's unmerited favor and holiness.

And Paul reminds them who the God of the Gospel is. "From God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ". In and because of Jesus, His Father has now become our Father! We, too, have become sons and daughters of the Father Jesus knows and loves.

"God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

God. Lord. Those are amazing words from a man who grew up as a faithful Jew. Every day Paul would have spoken the so-called Shema: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our

God, the Lord is one!" (Deuteronomy 6:4). It is *the* Jewish prayer. And look what Paul has done with it! In light of his encounter with Jesus, what he has learned in Jesus, in light of who he has learned Jesus to be; he has expanded the Shema. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one!" Yes, one. But not solitary, not alone, Lord...God. "Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ". Put on Ephesian glasses: And you and I see the Living God in a whole new way!

And Paul points the Ephesians to the heart of the Gospel. "Lord Jesus Christ." Things have changed. There is a new Kurios in town. And He is building a new temple. God has installed Him as a new Sovereign on the throne of the cosmos. God is building a very different kind of Empire with a very different kind of Emperor. "Lord Jesus Messiah".

And the letter the apostle and prisoner of the Lord Jesus Christ writes to the "holy ones" in the city of Ephesus, is all about navigating this alternative reading of reality. It's all about making sense and then walking in the alternative reality centered in "the Lord Jesus Messiah".

With these new glasses on we are in for quite an adventure!