

Amos 7:7-15
Psalm 85:8-13
Ephesians 1:3-14
Mark 6:14-29

Sermon for July 14, 2024

THE MEANING OF LIFE

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: A plan for the fullness of time.

St Paul led a very busy life, traveling all over the known world, 'planting' churches as they say these days, then returning to them after a period of time, always hearing reports from them about how things were going, for better or for worse. He was constantly dealing with problems arising in those churches, and the nature of those problems changed over time. Meanwhile he was training his own followers themselves to be missionaries and caretakers and teachers, all the while taking care of health issues of his own, and preoccupied with fending off adversaries, both in the new Gentile world and from the original Jewish church in Jerusalem.

Given all this activity, it's a wonder that he found time to engage in correspondence at all, but some of his greatest letters were written during these periods of intense activity.

Occasionally, though, Paul did have periods of calm, periods of months when he could, so to say relax, and contemplate the big picture.

I'm reminded of a fellow with whom I was in regular correspondence many years, although he has now passed away. He tended to write long letters: one of them was 94 handwritten pages. The reason he could write such long letters was the same reason Paul occasionally had plenty of time on his hands: he was in prison.

What we call the letter to the Ephesians is one of those letters, written while Paul was incarcerated for the first time in Rome. During that time, he was able to

meditate on the profound mysteries of Christ, and communicate the results of that meditation to his churches. Its subject matter, we might say, is the heavenly Christ rather than the earthly Jesus.

Thus in the opening verses of the letter that () read for us this morning, you find passages like the following:

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,

1:4 just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.

And:

With all wisdom and insight

1:9 he – God – has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ,

1:10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

There's nothing like an argument here, it's more or less a paean of praise and wonder; in fact, in the original Greek, that whole section, vv. 3-14, that () read are just one long sentence.

So rather than breaking it down and analyzing the component elements, I think it might be best at least for today to simply savor and wonder at the central thought that is the source of Paul's own amazement: that the heavenly Christ stands at the heart of God's creation, that all things on heaven and earth proceed from him and are destined to return in perfect purity to him. We're not being asked to understand this, but rather to wonder at it; as we can stand in awe and wonder under the starry sky without being astrophysicists.

That sounds kind of churchy and pious, I know, but perhaps thinking a little about our Gospel reading from Mark today will bring it down to earth for us. This is really the only example in any of the Gospel accounts where the gospel writer, so to speak, pauses and gives us a fairly extensive background on some secondary characters. And in this case, it's quite a background!

So let's read it together, and as we do so, let's keep our question in mind: why would Mark have bothered, about people like these in particular, to pause and tell us so much about them?

Mark 6: 14-2

The Herod involved in this story is Herod Antipas, and he and his whole family were quite a cast of characters. He was the son of another Herod, the one history knows as Herod the Great. Herod the Great was the King of Israel when Jesus was born. This was the Herod whom the Magi visited, and who ordered the death of all the children under two years in Israel. Herod the Great had a history of infanticide: he in fact murdered many of his own children by a variety of wives.

One of those children who escaped his wrath was Herod Antipas. One of those who did not was a son named Aristobulus, who before he was killed as an adult, gave birth to the woman Herodias, the one mentioned in our story. She in turn married yet another of Herod the Great's sons named Herod Philip, a half-brother of Herod Antipas, and they had a daughter, named Salome. At a certain point, Herod Antipas went to visit this married couple: Herodias, his niece, and Herod Philip, his half-brother, which made Herodias both his niece and his sister-in-law. He ended up divorcing his own wife, seducing his sister-in-law niece, Herodias, and persuading her to divorce her husband, whereupon he married her himself.

Are you following me?

Anyway, the bottom line is that Herodias and Herod Antipas were living in a profoundly incestuous marriage that was in violation of almost every Jewish religious law concerning divorce and marriage.

Enter John the Baptist, who was by this time widely regarded as the latest and perhaps one of the greatest of Jewish prophets. When he loudly and publicly condemned the marriage, Herodias persuaded her husband to have John arrested and imprisoned until he recanted his condemnation of their marriage. When John refused to do so, Herodias devised the scheme we read about in today's passage, which resulted in John being beheaded.

And you thought Washington was a swamp!

But the reason I'm providing all this history is not just to describe a very messy moral and political situation that plays a part in the history of Jesus. What I want to bring out is that it's precisely because it plays such a part in the history of our Lord that we're familiar with the story at all, that it has any lasting significance to anybody except perhaps a very specialized historian. In other words, the only

reason this sordid episode has any significance at all in the divine and eternal sense is because of its relation to Christ.

And in fact the same is true of John the Baptist himself. If Jesus has not appeared one day on the banks of the Jordan River and allowed himself to be baptized by John, no one – except perhaps that same specialized historian – would care or even know that John existed. His eternal and divine significance derives entirely from his relation to Christ.

And I suspect that's the fundamental reason why Mark, writing under the influence of Christ's own Holy Spirit, is led in this one little portion of Scripture to provide all this detail regarding this one particularly messy human episode, because it vividly illustrates how human life, in all its complexity, really only acquires divine meaning and consequence insofar as it stands in relation to Christ.

The absurd avarice and self-serving maneuvers of Herod the Great and his woeful offspring, the timidity and misguided stubbornness of Herod Antipas and the evil machinations of his monstrous wife, the moral corruption of their daughter Salome, even the stalwart and unyielding religious courage of John the Baptist...all these would have no more eternal interest than the ripples of waves washing on the shore and disappearing into the sand, except for one thing: the entry into human affairs of the reality of God in the divine person of Jesus.

And what can be said of these folks can be said of all of human history, and every actor in it. The unthinkable savagery of Hitler and Stalin and Mao Tse-tung along with the unthinkable goodness of St. Francis or mother Teresa or Albert Schweitzer; the discordant shrieks of human suffering and grief along with the harmonious beauty of Beethoven and Brahms; the madness of the insane and the genius of Shakespeare; the devastation of hurricane and volcano along with the glory of sunrise and starry night...all these have eternal meaning for one reason and one reason only: Because Jesus Christ lives.

The simple fact is, and the most profound truth is, that except for the presence of Christ in it, human life and activity has no meaning beyond itself. Without Christ at its center, life is truly and only, as Shakespeare poetically put it, *A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.*

How does that all apply to us? It's quite simple, really. It's the source of our hope and the foundation of our peace. However complicated our lives become, whatever difficulties we face, no matter the missteps we take, no matter the evil designs of others upon us, however bleak the future may appear, we have the assurance of faith given utterance by Paul :

With all wisdom and insight

1:9 he – God – has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ,

1:10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

And so our prayer for this morning, Gracious God, is that we may remain faithful in our acknowledgment of Your grace revealed in the person and instruction, the death and resurrection, the eternal and abiding and loving presence with us of your only begotten Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.