

How the Plan Works Itself Out

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Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

July 11, 2021

The gospel of Jesus Christ summons each of us individually, and all of us together, to *hopeful realism*. Hopeful realism is a shorthand expression for our vocation that can keep us from falling into two traps that are always lurking, and interestingly, that are both present in our lives today. On the one hand, it can keep us from falling into a despair that things are going nowhere good. There can be a deep temptation in our broken world to wring our hands, to think that it's all going to pot, and there's nothing to be done about it. On the other hand, it can keep us from falling into a willful naivete about the costs of hope. For there is also a deep temptation in our world to think that, if we just elect the right leader, or if we just get the right bill passed, or if we just get the right job, or the right partner, or the right house, or the right college, then everything will be good and will all fall into place. The gospel of Jesus Christ finds the steady path between both of those traps.

And taken together, our two texts today provide us with precisely this kind of hopeful realism, one that is energizing and grounded and steady and full of inspiration, all at the same time.

Ephesians 1:3-14 is a *song*. It is a song of blessing. "*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." Bang. Right off the bat, Paul – or perhaps one of his disciples who may have written this letter – lifts our eyes up on high. It is a song of being chosen and destined. "He *chose* us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless. He *destined* us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ." And it is a song of purposefulness, a song about a plan. "He has made known to us the mystery of his will ... as a plan for the fullness of time ... according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and his will."

Ephesians 1:3-14 is a song; it is a song about where we have come from, and it is a song about where we are going. One of the things that is required for hope is the knowledge that we are headed somewhere good. People know about this from long car rides that you may take with the family. Driving along the interminable stretches of interstate 95, or the New Jersey Turnpike, or sheer across the country. Long stretches. *Boring* stretches that even a series of videos in the car cannot fix. But the stretches are bearable when you know that on the other end is a visit you're your cousins, or with your grandparents, or getting to see the Grand Canyon, or getting to the beach for your annual vacation. When you know that you are headed somewhere good, it will sustain you through quite a lot.

And the plan, according to Ephesians 1, is the deepest, most sustaining, hope that we have. Ephesians 1:10 tells us that the plan for the fullness of time, the plan set forth in Christ is "*to gather up all things in him*, things in heaven and things on earth." Or as the Common English Bible translation puts it, "to bring all things together in Christ." In our astonishingly polarized world, where we are told that enemies are around every corner, where we are encouraged to demonize and scorn anyone who disagrees with us, what Ephesians 1 teaches us is that the sovereign God is bringing all things together in Christ, gathering all things together in Christ. And this reconciling mission is not some pipe-dream or just wishful thinking. This is being done, verse 11 tells us, "according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will." It is the intention of God, it is the will of God, which is going to happen.

So keep your chin up.

But do not be mistaken.

This unifying, reconciling work is not automatic, and it will not come without a very deep cost. The gospel is hopeful and completely confident about where the path of God's love is going, but the gospel is thoroughly realistic about the costs that will be borne by those who are willing to embody that love in our world.

Mark 6 is a story that seems made for film. It's got a lavish party, it's got violence, it's got sex, it's got political intrigue, it's got betrayal. It's like watching "House of Cards" or "The Godfather." But in the midst of the drama, we should not miss the ways that Mark is setting up parallels between what happens to John the Baptist here, and what happens to Jesus a few chapters later. When the Gospel of Luke tells the story, Luke connects John and Jesus by their birth narratives in Luke 1 and 2. When the Gospel of Mark tells the story, Mark connects these two by the ways they die. John and Jesus both serve God's purposes in the world, and in the course of their service, both of them encounter unreliable political figures, first with Herod and later with Pilate, who vacillate between their fascination with John and Jesus and their fearful anxiety about what the people around them think.

John confronted Herod with the wrongfulness of his marital behavior, but in spite of this, we are told that Herod "liked to listen to" John. But when Herod garishly asks his daughter what she would like as a reward for the way she has entertained Herod's fancy and powerful friends, she and her mother ask for John's head on a platter. And rather than standing his ground and saying that he will not do such a thing, Herod bends his will to the winds of reputational pressure, and has John executed.

It's an awful story. And part of what makes it so awful is that we sense that this is not a fantasy tale. It is an all-too-familiar story about the ways that power and

corruption and greed can drive people to do cruel things, and the way that in a world of violence and hatred, righteous love is not always welcome. Now, because we have been conditioned by Hollywood, we may want the cavalry to ride in at the 11th hour and save John. We may want the disciples to launch a last-minute raid on Herod's palace and rescue John from danger. Just as there is a part of us that would enjoy seeing battalions of angel armies swoop in at the end of the gospel, with their swords of fire, and save Jesus from his violent death at the hands of the powerful. We have been conditioned to be comfortable with the myth of redemptive violence, where violence is a necessary tool in the hands of the righteous to accomplish a good ending.

But the gospel refuses the myth of redemptive violence. The disciples do not launch that raid. Jesus does not call down the angel armies. The way of the cross is a costly path. Working for reconciliation in a world of animosity will exact a deep cost from you. Being a person of love will exact deep costs from you, whether you are loving your children, or loving others in the church, or loving those who are different from you. We should not be naïve about this. The way of love, which is the way of the cross, is a costly path.

But here again, do not be mistaken. Just because the path of love is costly, just because the path of righteousness will lead you into conflict, just because the powers that be are deeply threatened by the freedom of those who place their trust in Jesus and who will sometimes act violently on the basis of that threat, just because the path of love is costly, does not mean that God's plan is not working itself out. Mark 6 keeps our feet realistically on the ground, but Ephesians 1 is still teaching us that God's plan, God's will for bringing all things together – *all* things, not just those things we like and agree with, but bringing all things together – this is being done according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will. The reconciliation of all things is going to happen. It may not happen as quickly as we would like. And there will be those who will be tempted to use violence to hurry things along. But it will happen, as surely as day follows night, and as surely as the rainbow follows the storm.

The hopeful realism of the gospel helps us to stay on the path, following God's will as clearly as we know how, in the sure and certain hope that God's purposes will come to fruition in the fullness of time. To God be all the glory, Amen.