

Ephesians 2: 4-10, 19-22 (CEB)

⁴⁻⁵ However, God is rich in mercy. He brought us to life with Christ while we were dead as a result of those things that we did wrong. He did this because of the great love that he has for us. You are saved by God's grace! ⁶ And God raised us up and seated us in the heavens with Christ Jesus. ⁷ God did this to show future generations the greatness of his grace by the goodness that God has shown us in Christ Jesus.

⁸ You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. ⁹ It's not something you did that you can be proud of. ¹⁰ Instead, we are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives. . . .

¹⁹ So now you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, you are fellow citizens with God's people, and you belong to God's household. ²⁰ As God's household, you are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ The whole building is joined together in him, and it grows up into a temple that is dedicated to the Lord. ²² Christ is building you into a place where God lives through the Spirit.

Everyone ends up somewhere, but few people end up somewhere on purpose.¹

Casting a vision for a church, as for any organization or individual, is a bit like using a GPS navigation system in a car. Most of time we ride around zoomed in on the map so we can find the right street. But sometimes, we need to zoom out so we can see where we are really headed and to make sure it is in the right direction.

When we zoom all the way out from our day to day lives, we can see that we are headed for the restoration of all God's creation, for a time when the kingdom of God is embraced in every corner of the globe, a time when the marriage of heaven and earth is fully consummated. This is the grand over-arching vision of God's purposes within which our own visions for our lives, our families, even St. Andrew must be seen.

If we at St. Andrew begin then to zoom in again, looking to see where we should be headed in the next thirty years the question before us is this: as we await the final merger of heaven and earth, what can we do, now and thirty years from now, to build for the kingdom of God? What can we do to help renew creation and to restore our relationship with God and amongst ourselves?

There are three key questions we ought to be asking ourselves.

First, are we helping those who are already part of this fellowship to *grow* in their relationship with Jesus Christ and one another?

Second, are we helping to *reach* others for Christ?

And finally, the third leg in this three-legged stool, are we *servicing* not only the body of Christ, but the larger world around us?

As we seek to live out God's vision, our own vision must be far-sighted and clear-headed. It must dare us to demand more from ourselves, to be generous and resolute, to remain faithful to God in *all* things. It is a challenge we must embrace.

But how do we arrive at such a vision? How do we know where God would have us head? How can we discern God's vision for us within God's larger purpose? These are

¹This is a wonderfully wise and easy-to-remember saying that I've borrowed from Craig Groeschel who borrowed it from Andy Stanley. Isn't the body of Christ a wondrous thing!

not new questions. God's people have been asking them ever since God first came to Abraham. One such man was named Nehemiah.

Nehemiah

You may remember Mike Rowe's show, *Dirty Jobs*. Week after week he took on one nasty task after another. There was even a British version of the show that looked at the worst jobs in history. Nehemiah has one of those jobs. He is the Persian king's cupbearer. Yes . . . Nehemiah's job is to taste the drink before giving it to the king in order to make sure the king isn't poisoned. On the one hand, Nehemiah is clearly expendable. It makes one wonder how frequently Artaxerxes ran through cupbearers. But on the other hand, Nehemiah must have been highly trusted by the king. In today's story, Nehemiah relies on the king's trust to move forward with God's plans for Jerusalem and comes to see clearly God's vision for his people.

Nehemiah has learned that Jerusalem is still in a terrible state, even decades after exiles began returning to the city. Though cupbearers are to come before the king with a smile on their face at all times, Nehemiah is unable to hide his sadness. When the king asks him what is wrong, Nehemiah describes his deep concern for "the city of his fathers" and asks permission to go to Jerusalem to oversee the rebuilding. Nehemiah had prayed to God about this and his prayers were answered. Artaxerxes grants permission and even helps Nehemiah in his mission, providing safe passage and building materials.

"Put into my heart"

When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, he doesn't tell anyone about his mission. But he's got one and he's confident that God is behind it: "I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem."

When I read the stories of the Old Testament prophets, I'm sometimes a bit envious. They have such a strong sense of purpose. Their dreams and visions fuel them and the work they do. I wonder what the visions were really like. What did Isaiah and the rest see? What would I have seen had I been there with them? The visions of these prophets provided vision for the people. The prophets brought the people purpose and direction from God. Their prophetic vision kept the people from wandering aimlessly in life, from casting aside all restraint and living only in the moment. The prophets called the people back to God's way and the joy of a life lived before God.

Nehemiah was not a prophet. His mission to Jerusalem was not born in a vision. He prayed and, in his own words, God put it on his heart. Nehemiah was sure what God wanted from him and seemed sure of the best way to go about it. Perhaps he saw that going to Jerusalem was the only course that made sense in light of God's purpose for his people. Whatever Nehemiah felt in his heart, it emboldened him to ask a lot of the Persian king.

What I like about this story is that I can identify with Nehemiah more than I can with the visions of the OT prophets, such as Isaiah's commissioning in Isaiah 6. I've never had a vision or a dream remotely like Isaiah describes. But God has placed purpose and direction into my heart as God placed it into Nehemiah's heart.

A personal vision

Nehemiah's story reminds us that God speaks to different people in different ways. Some of us might have a "spectacular" experience of our own. For others, like me, God's speaking is quieter, forcing me to shut up long enough to hear. Most often, God speaks to me through the pages of Scripture. It is in these stories and letters, such as today's, that God punches through my busyness and distraction. This is why it is so important that we not come to the Bible seeking merely a set of principles about how we ought to live or even a systematic presentation of our beliefs.

Rather, we step into Scripture so that we can hear God's voice for ourselves, so we can come to understand who we really are and what God has in mind for us and, yes, for St. Andrew.

Just as God provided focus and direction for Nehemiah, God provides it for us as well. But it doesn't happen by magic. There's no fortune cookie to crack and no crystal ball we'll gaze into. Nehemiah prayed and we are to pray. Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem and became part of the community there. We are to become part of the God's community as well, here at St. Andrew. Worshipping here each week, getting involved, learning alongside other Christians – this is how we come to hear God's voice. For we are a fellowship of God's people . . . a church.

A church?

As we move forward with our master plan, 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, Paul reminded Gentile Christians² 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 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 newly enhanced 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 cornerstone³ of it all. When we rise each week to recite the Apostles Creed and affirm our belief in "one holy catholic church," we mean the universal church, the body of Christ – 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, 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 come to St. Andrew to see the beauty and sacredness expressed in our sanctuary and campus. But they want more. When they come, they want to feel the presence of God. They want to see the church living out its faith – kindness, love, patience, service to others, and so on. They want to see the relevance of the faith for their lives. With God's help, we do not disappoint them.

In the coming weeks, we will talk about God's vision for our lives and for St. Andrew. We don't all have the same purpose. God didn't send all the Jews to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. But we do all have purpose grounded in Christian hope. And together we'll find God's vision for us all.

² 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.

³ 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.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

We Christians ought to be better than we are at forgetting the past. Yet, we cling to our past, carrying our mistakes, the wrongs done to us, the unrealized hopes, and much more around with us, like a sack lifted over our shoulder. But God urges us to a vision for our lives, a new vision, one grounded in God's way and God's hope. Craig Groeschel suggests that we each spent a little time writing our own epitaph, looking ahead to the final chapter of our lives. Groeschel asks, "How would you want to finish these statements about your life?"

- "The thing that was most important to me was . . ."
- "People say I stood for . . ."
- "I made a difference in my world by . . ."
- "God was glorified because I . . ."
- "People knew I loved them because . . ."

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, Psalm 14 What is the psalmist's perspective on those who deny even the existence of God? What does the psalmist await? God takes care of the poor and weak in a world given over to godlessness.

Tuesday, Isaiah 42:5-6 & 49:6 Israel (the people of God) is to be the light to the world.

Wednesday, Ephesians 4:17-24 Off with the old, on with the new!

Thursday, Matthew 20:20-28 Service as greatness

Friday, 1 Corinthians 3:10-17 God's temple is the church; the "you" is the church in Corinth.

Saturday, Ephesians 2:11-22 A single new humanity

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Genesis

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the Gospel of Luke

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

New series starting Jan 8: *Simply Good News: Reading the gospels with N. T. Wright*