

"From Hopelessness to Absolute Confidence"

Text: Ephesians 2:11-22

"And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen." (1 Peter 5:10-11)

Dear Fellow Christians:

To begin this morning I'm going to ask you to attempt the impossible. I'm going to ask you to imagine hopelessness. You can't, but I want you to try. As a Christian – especially if you've been a Christian for a very long time – you are incapable of true, abject hopelessness. As a Christian your core values are all based on hope. Remember that Biblically speaking we define "hope" as "confident expectation" – the kind of hope that God's Word tells us **"never disappoints."** That means that no matter how bad things get here on this earth, we live in *confident expectation* of better things to come. We look forward to the return of Jesus Christ, to a Day of Judgment where we will stand blameless before our God because of the goodness and perfection of Jesus Christ, and we look forward to an eternity in the sublime presence of that Almighty God. True hopelessness literally cannot exist – it has no chance – in the face of such promise, such expectation.

That said – and here's the most interesting part – it will not be possible for us to really appreciate what is to come if we cannot first grasp that which is nearly impossible for Christians, which is at least some measure of understanding of our former hopelessness.

It's possible that some of you have felt like you have been close to hopelessness in the past – maybe following some personal tragedy or battle with depression. The fact that you are still alive is probably irrefutable evidence that you have never truly plumbed the depths of absolute despair. Such helplessness is reserved for the Godless who, as their final life's-breath is exhaled, know with horrible certainty that they will awaken to the unending torments of hell. Eternally.

Given all of that, I would still ask you to give it a try. Picture yourself in an existence where not only is nothing at all good, nothing is ever going to get better. Try to comprehend the utter despair of knowing, *knowing*,

that you are damned, and that there is not a single thing that you, on your own, can do to change that reality.

This is actually not my idea, by the way. This is the place God the Holy Spirit directs you to go through the Apostle Paul in our text for this morning, recorded in the Second Chapter of his Epistle to the Church in Ephesus:

ESV Ephesians 2:11-22 Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands--¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

These are the very words of our God. May God lead you to hear and accept them as though he himself were standing before you and speaking them directly to you alone. That our God would so fill, strengthen, instruct and comfort each one of us through the study of these words this morning, so we pray: **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

A man named Dante once wrote a particularly powerful narrative poem, *The Divine Comedy*, in which he created a startling and lasting image of what he envisioned as a most appropriate sign over the entrance to hell: *Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.* The terrifying truth is that the torments of hell will not be restricted to the

physical. Every sense and every aspect or element of the human existence will be adversely affected. That means that the physical torment will be immeasurably compounded by utter hopelessness and despair. Human beings will exist forever in the moment, and that moment will be terrible beyond anything that we can now possibly imagine.

That abject misery will be further compounded by the knowledge that it didn't have to be that way. This is true especially for those who live in these times and in this country. The message of how man can avoid this unimaginable, eternal disaster is everywhere. What torment there will be just in knowing that escape was freely offered, and personally and repeatedly refused.

This is exactly the human condition the Holy Spirit wants us to recognize in the opening verses of our text, where through the pen of Paul we are told to **"remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world."** That, my friends, is a really, really bad place. It is also the place, the condition, we all shared before we were rescued.

And we were *rescued*. By inspiration our text tells us that before we were brought to faith in Jesus Christ we truly were without hope. A man who can still do something – anything – has hope. Only the human being who recognizes that he by himself can do absolutely nothing to improve his condition or to rescue himself from the certain fate that awaits him can truly know utter despair. The only "confident expectation" that he could have is of the wrath of the God that he has so grievously wronged.

All of this serves to shed light on a deficiency that we share as Christians: *We are naïve to the hostility that existed between us and our God – the hostility that would still exist today had it not been for Jesus Christ.* Do you, for example, ever stop to consider your own past, your own personal history and the desperate condition that was yours before your rescue? Few do, and the inevitable result is that we become spiritually lethargic. We become lax and detached from both the drama and the truly amazing circumstances surrounding our rescue. The result is that we take for granted and dramatically under appreciate the restoration of hope in our lives. Our text identifies that rescue with these simple words: **"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."** When he uses a phrase like **"far off"** Paul is speaking both ethnically and spiritually, as he is when he speaks of being **"brought near."** Ethnically the Gentiles

(the non-Jews) were "far off" in that they knew nothing of either the One True God or of the Law that he gave through Moses. The result of being **"far off"** was that once we didn't matter to God. Once, because of our sin and unbelief, we were God's enemies, and the natural result or condition of anyone who is God's enemy is hopelessness.

What changed all that? According to the divinely inspired words of our text, **"The blood of Christ."**

Again, failure to contemplate the fact that we were once **"far off"** makes it highly unlikely that we will *thrill* as we should to statements in our text like this one: **"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."** Or this one: **"In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."** Statements like these lose their force and depth whenever we imagine that it was always so; whenever we suppose that our present condition was either deserved or somehow inevitable.

The Holy Spirit through Paul in our text for this morning urges us to recognize that a true *hostility* existed between us and our God. Most imagine there was, at worst, neutrality between God and man – apart from faith in Jesus Christ. Scripture makes clear that there is no such thing as neutrality with God. You are God's holy, beloved child or you are God's enemy. No middle ground. Our text described what separated us from our God as **"the dividing wall of hostility."**

Understand the point that Paul is making here as he points out the great and bitter irony of the situation that existed between the Jews and the Gentiles. Jews and Gentiles hated each other. Our text creates the mental image of what it calls a **"wall of hostility"** between them. That "wall," at least in their minds, was the Law of Moses. Gentiles didn't have that Law, so the Jews dismissed them as existing forever in hopelessness. The Gentiles dismissed the Law as the arbitrary will of a God not their own. But here's the great irony. Though there was a **"wall of hostility"** between them, that wall was just an *interior* wall of the same dungeon of hopelessness that imprisoned them all. The condition of the Gentiles was hopeless because they didn't even know the One true God, but the condition of the Jews was just as hopeless because they had come to believe that they could earn their way into the favor of the God they did know through the keeping of that Law of Moses.

The result was that though Jews and Gentiles recognized the hostility that existed between each other, what they missed was the **"wall of hostility"** that existed between them and their God. In the end it doesn't really matter whether man rejects the existence of God or just rejects his plan for salvation (which is not through the keeping of the Law but through faith alone in Jesus Christ). The hostility of God toward both was the same. The real question is: *"How is that hostility removed?"*

The Holy Spirit answers in our text in a most unusual and striking way. There he talks of **"killing the hostility."** Our society in particular is mystified by such language. Our society believes that kindness and acceptance is the key to ending all animosity or hostility. By speaking of **"killing the hostility,"** our God makes clear that a certain sort of violence was necessary. Nor did he leave us in doubt as to what that violence looked like. The violence that was necessary was the righteous fury of divine wrath directed toward God's own Son, Jesus Christ. God himself **"killed the hostility"** by sacrificing his own Son on the cross of Calvary.

Remember how both Jews and Gentiles thought that "wall" that separated them was the Law of Moses? Jesus himself removed that "wall" by keeping it perfectly in our place. That means that every demand of that Law has now been fulfilled – once, by One, and forever for all. This was a shocking revelation for both Jew and Gentile. When what they thought was the problem was removed by Jesus, it was as if they looked around and for the first time recognized their true prison of hopelessness - the true wall of hostility that had separated them from their God.

You and I can see that wall still today, but by the grace of God we see it from the outside. By faith in Jesus Christ we now, in the words of our text, **"have access to the Father."**

The fact is God has not just made our salvation possible or likely. He has already accomplished it. It is an historic fact. In fact the entire thrust of this section of Scripture is Paul communicating to the Gentile Christians in Ephesus that their salvation *has already been accomplished*. The reconciliation *has already been achieved* by Jesus Christ. Jesus did so by removing the cause of our prior despair and hopelessness. He did it by removing the law, together with its demands and condemnation. That means that not only *was* it impossible for us to keep the law perfectly (which was the cause of our prior hopeless condition) now, through faith in Jesus Christ, God the Father sees us as already having kept the law perfectly. God himself has declared this to be a fact when he punished Jesus for what we had done.

This is the quality of life and faith our God wants to be the personal possession of every single human being. He wants us to know the purest relief and joy that can only be experienced by those who once knew utter despair, helplessness, and hopelessness. God the Holy Spirit grant to each of us a fuller appreciation and trust in these sublime truths, and in the freedom and confidence that is now ours. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 23:1-6** "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" declares the LORD. ² Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: "You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD. ³ Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴ I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD. ⁵ ¶ "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'

^{ESV} **Mark 6:30-34** The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.

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The 9th Sunday after Pentecost – July 22, 2018

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 296 (Stanzas 1-3) (Red Hymnal)

"Speak, O Lord, Thy Servant Heareth"

The Order of Service – Hymnal page 15ff. (Red Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Old Testament Lesson: (Jeremiah 23:1-6) Our two lessons this morning both speak of shepherds. In our first reading we hear God's condemnation of bad shepherds that were failing to lead the children of Israel as God had directed. So it was that the Lord promised to replace all of those evil shepherds with a Good Shepherd from the line of David who would never lead them astray nor forsake them. Christians have no trouble recognizing Jesus as that Good Shepherd whom God has sent.

The New Testament Lesson: (Mark 6:30-34) Our second lesson focuses again on shepherds, here giving us an example of the kind of Good Shepherd that our God sent us in Jesus Christ. Note that even though he was exhausted, Jesus still took pity on those whose needs were so great. Note also that Jesus concentrated on giving them first and foremost that which they needed most, for **"he began to teach them many things."**

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – (Hymnal page 22)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 387 (Stanzas 1-2, 4, 7-8) (Red Hymnal)

"Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice"

The Sermon – Text: Ephesians 2:11-22 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"From Hopelessness to Absolute Confidence"

The Offertory – (Hymnal page 22)

The Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 318 (Stanzas 1 & 3) (Red Hymnal)

"Before Thee God Who Knowest All"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Red Hymnal page 24ff)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis (Red Hymnal page 30)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 296 (Stanza 4) (Red Hymnal)

"Speak, O Lord, Thy Servant Heareth"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune** – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

Attendance - Sunday (35) Ave (41)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
	-11:30 a.m.	– Church Council Meeting
Saturday	-3:00 p.m.	– Nordstrom-Unger Wedding
Next Sunday	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time

CLC News – Pastor Rob Sauers has accepted the call to Luther Memorial of Fond du Lac, WI. Bethel of Morris has called Pastor David Ude. Berea of Inver Grove Heights has called Pastor Nathan Pfeiffer.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council of St Paul is scheduled to meet this morning during the fellowship hour. As always, please pass along any items for the meeting agenda to President Mark Johnson.

Outreach Committee – Please read through and prayerfully consider the letter in your mailbox from Outreach Committee Chairman Phil Pfennig. We have been somewhat lax in our outreach efforts and are seeking to remedy that. Address any questions to Mr. Pfennig, and prayerfully consider serving on this committee.

Wedding – Pastor Roehl is scheduled to officiate at the wedding of Carly Nordstrom and Tyler Unger on Saturday of this week. Zion Lutheran in Bismarck has been rented for the ceremony. The couple have completed pre-marriage counselling with Pastor Roehl and plan to go through information classes in the coming months.