

NOW MADE KNOWN
Ephesians 3:1-12

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on January 3, 2021, the Second Sunday of Christmas. A limited number of people present but otherwise closed for the Coronavirus pandemic, and the service was livestreamed.

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

I.

When I was a child, one of the books I remember around our house was entitled *The God That Failed*. Some of you may have known the book: it provided first-hand accounts of six leading intellectuals of the 1940s – including Arthur Koestler and Richard Wright – who were initially involved in Communism but who became disillusioned and abandoned it as it became more and more brutal, particularly under Stalin. I did not read the book as a child, but I was introduced to one of its essays in high school. It is a story of people who truly changed their minds about something major in human history, about a system that had become a “god” to them that failed and led them to look elsewhere for what is good and right and beautiful and just for the human creature.¹

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This week I received a newsletter from the History Department of the University of Arkansas, from which I graduated in 1976. Since 1981, the College of Arts and Sciences has borne the name of former United States Senator J. William Fulbright. The description of the college and its name reads as follows:

J. William Fulbright was a University of Arkansas student who graduated in 1925, was later a law professor and then became U of A president from 1939-41 – all prior to serving as a U.S. Senator for many years.

The university recognizes that J. William Fulbright’s political legacy is controversial and complex. Along with signing the Southern Manifesto and opposing the landmark 1954 ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*, Fulbright voted to filibuster the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and voted against the 1965 Voting Rights Act. These actions directly contradicted his efforts to advance cultural understanding, peace, and international exchange through education.

¹ Richard Crosman, ed. *The God That Failed* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950).

J. William Fulbright supported the creation of the United Nations and his efforts to increase mutual understanding between people and nations resulted in the creation of the Fulbright Program – the world’s largest international educational exchange program with more than 370,000 alumni, and thousands of students and scholars from 160 countries participating annually...

The website went on to say:

It’s his work to enhance cultural understanding, peace, and international exchange through education that we honor, and his service to this institution as president. How we view past leaders is an important topic and many colleges and communities are grappling with what’s right while working to understand the complete history of those involved and what we can learn from the process. There is no better place to have this discussion than on a college campus, where we value conversation, learning and debate.²

I noticed in the newsletter that a professor who was new to his career when I was an undergraduate and has gone on to become a biographer of both Fulbright and President Lyndon Johnson is involved in this effort.

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Finally, as I indicated over Christmas, I have been re-reading Marilynne Robinson’s 2004 novel *Gilead*, in which John Ames, a third-generation minister in the fictional town of Gilead, Iowa, writes a memoir he hopes his young son will read when the boy becomes older. Because Ames is seventy-six, and his son is seven, he believes he will pass away before his son becomes an adult.

Ames relates a time when his own father, also a minister, tries to convince him to leave Gilead for the larger world. His father had said:

We have lived within the limits of notions that were very old and even very local. I want you to understand that you do not have to be loyal to them.

But Ames had replied:

...the Lord absolutely transcends any understanding I have of Him which makes loyalty to Him a different thing from loyalty to whatever customs or doctrines and memories I...associate with Him.³

The younger Ames stayed in Gilead, inherited the congregation from his father, and preached there for over fifty years. During his ministry, he sought to see the hand of God sometimes *in*, sometimes *above*, sometimes *in opposition* to the changes occurring between the two world wars and reflected in the lives of his parishioners.

II.

I need not remind you of how much our world has continued to change since the period John Ames was narrating.

- Woman received the vote shortly after World War I, while at least in the Presbyterian Church, even in the 1950s, it was rare (or in some instances) forbidden for women to serve as elders or deacons, let alone ministers.

² Available at <https://catalog.uark.edu/undergraduatecatalog/collegesandschools/jwilliamfulbrightcollegeofartsandsciences/>.

³ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux: 2004). 235.

- Among some congregations in the Deep South, it was disallowed for Black people to be admitted to worship, better yet to join the church, and this had nothing to do with COVID.
- Late, in the 1970s a process began in the Presbyterian Church that forty years later led to the acceptance of gay and lesbian elders, deacons, and ministers, and in the past decade, for the church to conduct same-sex marriages.
- More recently, many families, businesses, school systems, and state legislatures wrestle with the request to recognize people by the gender with which they identify rather than the body with which they were born.

There are few regions, institutions, enterprises or even families which have not been touched by questions of race and sexual identity in terms of who is accepted and what is acceptable, no matter how the word “acceptance” is defined, and who does the defining.

III.

If we take a long view of history – which I am inclined to do – we go back not just to the founding of America or the development of the Enlightenment or establishment of the Holy Roman Empire a few centuries after the birth of Christ to trace the impact of changes in society and in the church.

- If we start our review of the human race with the early chapters of Genesis, we see that God created the earth and all that was in it in a “garden-like” Eden.⁴
- The Fall of Adam and Eve disrupted that idyllic existence, followed by division, tension, and violence,⁵ none of which seem to have taken leave of us since the Fall.
- Into this Fallen world, God chose and formed the people of Israel – through Abraham and Sarah – that they would both *receive* God’s blessing and be *agents of passing* that blessing on to “*all the nations of the world.*”⁶

This call occurred around the year 1800 BCE, and with the birth of Christ nearly two millennia later, God’s attempt to reach “all the nations of the world” took on renewed meaning.

A few decades after his death and resurrection, as reflected in our Scripture for today, the earliest generation of leaders of the church seek to bear witness to God’s promise to “all the nations of the world” by sharing the good news and grace of Jesus Christ with Gentiles, people who were not part of the Jewish covenant, people who were among the “nations of the world.”

In our passage, the writer of Ephesians marvels at both the *power* and *beauty* of God who through Christ is reaching out to and including within his promise the formerly excluded Gentiles.

The letter is written in the voice of the Apostle Paul. It brims with joy and energy and gratitude that reflects Paul at his best:

3This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— ²for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given to me for you, ³and how the

⁴ Genesis 1-2.

⁵ Genesis 3-11.

⁶ Genesis 12:1.

mystery was made known to me by revelation...⁶that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Paul is as joyful and grateful in this passage as we ever see him. What inspires him is what he describes earlier in the book as a “mystery,” God’s “*plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth.*”⁷ Paul says he is grateful that “*This grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles.*”

Just as Reverend John Ames recognizes it is God who transcends any of the “notions, memories or customs” through which he worships God; and just as he feels it is a privilege to be a part of some of those notions and customs *changing* under the active initiation of God, some remaining the same, so the writer of Ephesians feel privileged to be part of God’s activity as God works his purposes out.

Perhaps both Ames and the author of Ephesians could sing together a hymn from Ames’ era:

God is working his purpose out,
as year succeeds to year...

nearer and nearer draws the time,
the time that shall surely be:
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea.⁸

God is working God’s purpose out: God’s blessing to *all* the nations of the world.

IV.

I know we enter this New Year with *hope*:

- Hope that the vaccines now released will prove as effective as their tests have shown
- Hope that they will be distributed fairly and effectively
- Hope that people will receive them with confidence and trust
- Hope that will lead us to return to much of the life we knew before COVID 19, whatever time that takes.

I hope we enter this New Year with *hope*:

- The hope which usually accompanies, for at least a brief time, a new administration, as divided as we are and fractious as we are likely still to be.

⁷ Ephesians 1:9-10.

⁸ Arthur C. Ainger, “God Is Working His Purpose Out,” (1899), available at <https://hymnary.org/text/god-is-working-his-purpose-out>.

I hope we enter this New Year with *hope*:

- The hope that we will, during this upcoming year, once again hear the singing of choirs and touch the bread and wine as it is passed or as we come forward to receive it.

As we enter this New Year, I hope that we are able to resume and renew in person friendships, family relationships, student-teacher relationships, visits to and from grandparents to see newborn children. I hope that we are able to find or resume love and marriage.

As we go through the changes such hope can bring, we will face questions – in nearly every sector of life together – about what “customs, doctrines, memories” – secular or sacred – to bring into the new present and what to leave behind. We will rightly ask:

- How frequently will we need to go to an office to work?
- How frequently will we need to go a classroom to teach or learn?
- How frequently will we need to go to a courtroom for a hearing?
- How frequently will need to join others in a sanctuary for worship, prayer, singing, life together as a congregation of the people of God?

We will continue, as a nation and a church, to ask how to bear witness to the reality that God’s promises extend to and include “all the nations of the world.” We will ask with renewed intentionality and vigor: Which structures and laws and customs and traditions and norms and rules will be retired, and which will be added, to bear witness to and live into that reality given to Abraham and Sarah, confirmed by Jesus Christ, and borne witness to by the writer of Ephesians, namely: that “all the nations of the world” are worthy of our attention, because they have God’s attention.

But as we step into this New Year – celebrating if for no other reason than that 2020 is over! – what a time to recognize and remember that God is working God’s purpose out, and that we are privileged to be part of it. We don’t initiate it. We don’t control it. We don’t determine its outcome. We just join it, joyfully.

As Ames says near the end of his memoir, he writes to his young son:

*“There are a thousand thousand reasons to live this life,
every one of them sufficient.”*

Welcome to 2021. There are “a thousand thousand reasons” to think it will be a good year.

God is working his purpose out,
as year succeeds to year...

Amen.