

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10) – Year B – July 12, 2009
2 Samuel 6: 1-5b, 12b-19; Psalm 24; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29
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“Spiritual transformation is often thought of as a movement from darkness to light. In one sense that is true, but in another sense it is totally false... Shadows are required for our seeing. God alone lives in perfect light (James 1:17).” So says, Richard Rohr. He continues, “We see in Christian history the Eastern Church trying to create ... liturgies with little sense of social justice, Luther’s abhorrence of his own darkness; the Swiss reformers trying to outlaw darkness; the Puritans trying to repress darkness; the typical believer afraid of darkness.... Then comes the postmodern world, ... in love with darkness!” As hard as we might try, we cannot avoid the human mystery, which is the weaving of threads of darkness alongside the bright and glorious colors of love and hope that are the gift of pure grace.

The letter to the church in Ephesus is also complex and mysterious in many ways. It has the form of a Jewish prayer of praise or blessing – *berakah* -- and is similar to the public honor lists of great benefactors that we talked about last week – except these boasts are all about the Holy Trinity! Since we will welcome Alexis as the newest member of Christ’s Body this morning, we could not have had a more fitting piece of Scripture to celebrate Alexis’ baptism and all the good gifts of God’s grace. But it is worth remembering how hard you and I sometimes struggle to accept in body, mind, and spirit just how beloved we are in Christ. It’s no secret that many people, Christian and otherwise, wrestle with low self-esteem, guilt and shame, despair, and a wide spectrum of depressive states. So today, God is inviting us all to take these next few minutes to release ourselves from the prison of our fears, and to soak ourselves in His bountiful grace.

Today’s letter is a song of hope; it encourages us in faithful service and trust. We can’t share the blessing, until we know how blessed we are, and that is what this portion of Ephesians teaches us. Here is the sevenfold list of the blessings of God that we celebrate in faith, and through our baptism: election; adoption as God’s children; the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ; redemption through the forgiveness of all our sins; revelation in the discernment of God’s will; our eternal inheritance and hope for new and unending life in Christ; and the indwelling gift of the Holy Spirit our advocate and guide. You and I have done nothing, and can **do** nothing to buy, earn, or otherwise procure any of these gratuitous gifts of God. For example, our election in Christ by God’s gift of faith occurred “before the foundation of the world”. If that election sounds like we were predestined to be God’s children, then let’s be clear about the definition. It is not what Calvin meant by predestination. It is what God planned throughout the whole history of salvation. Through God’s chosen people, the Israelites, and in Christ Jesus, God’s only Son, our Lord and Savior, both Jew and Gentile, are being reconciled to God. We only have to read the Gospels to know that Jesus never imposes God’s will on anyone. He never demands, cajoles or forces anyone to accept Him, despite knowing that that is God’s will and that God desires only the very best for all His children. As we also discovered last week, free will is still operative. Salvation is available to all. Not everyone will accept the gift.

For those that do, the second blessing is adoption as God’s children. This has a significant parallel in the Sacrament of Baptism, where by water and the Holy Spirit we are born anew into Christ’s Body, the church, adopted as God’s children, becoming heirs of God’s kingdom, named and sealed as God’s own forever. In the tumult of our busy lives, this letter reminds us of what is really important, because it is easy to forget the privilege and the responsibility of adoption and inheritance. It’s easy because life happens: we watch the value of our investments sink to new lows, lose our jobs, see our loved ones struggle with poor health, divorce or other major life-changing events. It begs the question, “how does the promise of something that seems so intangible in the present reality help me to get through another day of pain, pay my bills, or deal with other aspects of my life?” Did you notice how I phrased the question? There was a lot of me statements in there and nothing about the truth of living into our new reality as the Body of Christ, where the appropriate pronouns are ‘we’, ‘our’, and ‘us’, and the

responsibility is to share, love and care for one another. The immediate benefit of adoption and inheritance is that we are surrounded by community, and constantly supported, not only in our faith, but in the practical aspects of our lives through prayer, and the right stewardship of all God's gifts. In gratitude, we do not sit back and watch our brothers and sisters in Christ, or anyone in our broader community go hungry when we have food to share. That is why we give to the Love Kitchen and the Bread of Life mission to feed, clothe and offer shelter to the hungry and homeless. It is why we share our time, talent and treasure with those who are not as fortunate as we are. We are empowered in our new way of life by the Spirit of adoption and the endless river of God's lavish grace flowing through us.

God's gifts are astounding, surpassing all we can imagine, such that the only right response is to worship and praise God with a full and grateful heart. We're only just over half way through the blessings that speak of the power that God has given us through Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Our freedom in Christ is the greatest of all freedoms: our salvation is assured, our sins are forgiven, and we are redeemed once and for all by our gracious and loving Savior. We have talked a bit about our inheritance as heirs of God's kingdom and adopted sons and daughters. Much of our inheritance is a future promise, even though we now know our present blessings for this life. God has no grandchildren – only children – and so one of the greatest gifts we hold as stewards of the promise is the gift of hope. We live a life of praise now as witnesses to the hope that dwells in our hearts, whatever our circumstances. We offer God our worship now as participants in a life of faith, trusting in God's promise and passing along our hope in Christ Jesus from generation to generation. While the world has embraced a culture of death and darkness, you and I live in the Light of God. We are not perfect people. We also have to deal with the reality of darkness while we strive to bring more of the light into the world. That is why in our Baptismal Covenant, we promise to return to the Lord in repentance when -- not if -- we fall into sin.

Finally, there is the gift of the Holy Spirit, marking us as God's own, leading us in all Truth, and a testament to God's continuing presence in the world. The Holy Spirit speaks to each of us, and to the whole church of God in Christ Jesus, reminding us constantly of the hope we carry into the darkest reaches of the world. No person, neighborhood, country, or situation is ever hopeless while the Body of Christ is a living and active presence in the world, to the praise of his glory. Look around, each faithful follower of Jesus is a mirror of God's glory, and a blessing of praise. If glory and praise have become for us words that sound like the proverbial apple pie, think again. The meaning here for the glory of God is the Jewish *kabod*, that is the weight and *gravitas* of the presence of God in the world. Praising God is fundamental to who we are in Christ. All creation was made to offer worship and praise to God. Praising God, and glorifying God's name is not just something we do on Sunday's, it is what Jesus did throughout His whole life, and the way of life we are invited to enter into. Beloved in Christ, as we are blessed to continue our own transforming journeys from darkness to light, we live in the knowledge and joy of what Christ is doing to redeem the suffering of our world. This anonymous poem speaks volumes to the trust we are called to in carrying that strangely textured mixture of light and darkness. "Not until each loom is silent / And the shuttles cease to fly, Will God unroll the pattern / And explain the reason why / The dark threads are as needful / In the Weaver's skillful hand / As the threads of gold and silver / For the pattern which He planned." Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Amen.