

In doing my research for this sermon, I read an academic article about the reference in verse 13 to being marked with “the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.” It turned out not to be directly useful to the sermon, as is so often the case, but it was an interesting excursion into the minutiae of other people’s theological concerns. It seems that people want to know exactly what the “seal” is, and if it’s baptism, or what, and how it relates to the idea of predestination, since verse 5 says that God destined us for adoption through Jesus Christ. So someone far more patient and learned than I, one Clinton E. Arnold, dug in and did some very careful research on the history of seals in Ephesus. The gist of it was that in Asia Minor, there was a robust tradition of making marks, or “seals,” as emblems of protection by a god or a powerful magician. This was not in the dominant Greek cultural tradition, but peculiar to Asia Minor. So, the author of the article concludes, when whoever wrote the letter to the Ephesians decided to use the expression “marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit,” that person was not making some kind of cosmic statement having to do with God predestining some people for salvation and others for eternal damnation. They weren’t making a cosmic statement about the properties of baptism. They were responding “to the felt needs of the common people within the churches of western Asia Minor, who perceived themselves as oppressed by the demonic realm.” (Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic*, 135. “The seal of the Spirit and the religious climate of Ephesus” by Thomas Rodney, *Restoration Quarterly*, 2001) These people lived in a context of magic and demonic possession, and to them, part of what characterized the power of God through Jesus Christ was protection from malignant forces. You would recognize that protection

by a seal, or an amulet.

That's what caught my attention: the author of this letter used imagery and language that would respond to the needs of the common people of this area. He had listened to them, perhaps was one of them, and he spoke to them in their own terms because he wanted them really to hear the larger message of God's embracing love.

The beginning of the letter to the Ephesians is one long praise of God. "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." Blessed be God who has blessed us. What are we to do with this blessing? "... that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory." We're to live in a way that praises God, or evokes praise for God. It's not complicated. It's mostly just happy.

But the predestination language has been something of a thorn in the collective Christian side for centuries. If God predestined us, God must have pre-destined others, right? Most likely the Methodists. Or the weird ones, like Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons. Definitely the non-Christians—the Jews, the Muslims. And don't even get me started on atheists and agnostics. Well, you see where this leads us. The predestined end up being people most like us—or, as an alternative, we live in secret desperate anxiety about whether we ourselves are actually predestined.

The journalist Doug Mendenhall gets the thorn out of our side with a story about his family. A white couple living in Alabama, they wanted to adopt a child, and

they decided to ask for a biracial child because such kids are harder to find families for. So that's what they did, they chose their biracial child before they knew of his specific existence, and when they first saw him and held him, they had already chosen him and loved him. That, Doug Mendenhall says, is what it means to say that God destined us for adoption as God's children. God chose to love us and then, loving us, chose us to be family. He says, "Lift your eyes from that passage, look around humbled by the epiphany of it, and you will see all around you people just like you, loved by the Creator because he loves them for exactly the same reasons he loves you. They are your brothers and sisters by adoption, different though you may be." http://www.huffingtonpost.com/doug-mendenhall/rising-above-the-lowwater_b_4519489.html

The author of the letter to the Ephesians used their own language to communicate God's bottomless love. He slid into a family relationship with them, *adopting* their conceptual universe of mystery religions and magical rites, in which protection from demons was a major issue. He did this because, I assume, he saw them as brothers and sisters, and wanted to speak their language. This is very dear. I would like to be able to do more of this.

How do we communicate God's bottomless love, and make our lives a reason to praise God, in this culture? We want to alleviate human suffering, but we know we can't just keep putting bandaids on those who have been run over by the wheels of a system that benefits a few at the expense of the many. We have to talk about systemic injustice. Yet public discourse today is oriented toward domination, and it's hard to engage in discussion of important issues because discussions devolve

quickly into domination or being dominated. That's the cultural matrix that *we* find ourselves in, in which we are called to make our lives a reason to praise God.

There is not a formulaic answer, and certainly not something that can be delivered at the end of a sermon. But this is our project. I really think it has to do with learning to pray. We discovered the power of non-violence as a strategic tool for transformation when Gandhi and Mandela and King used it in the public realm, but first they had to discover it and learn it through personal practice. It might feel like a first-world luxury to say that we have to learn to pray, but the struggle for justice is spiritual as well as political. If we are not well-nourished spiritually, how can we stand up for long in a culture so trapped in patterns of domination and nihilism? We need to practice: prayer, contemplation, meditation, play—whatever shape it may take. And hope that transformation in ourselves leads to the transformation of our society.

I remember years ago reading an Episcopalian lectionary commentary in which the suggested sermon topic was the eucharist, communion. The commentator was in favor of it. I feel a little the same way now, preaching a sermon in which the topic is prayer, and the preacher is in favor of it. But I know that our context is hectic and results-oriented and materialistic, and we don't get a lot of support for taking the time to sit still and let the glitter settle and listen quietly. So I'm encouraging that. Pray. Take 20 minutes every day to sit, be still and know that God is God. There are other ways to pray too, but you have to try them all out for yourself. Prayer, I think, will begin to free us from the demons of our world.

Let us pray:

Give us peace, Lord. The vital peace which gives energy to the lifeless; the missing peace which waits to walk among the war-weary; the conversation peace which reconciles enemies; the party peace which gathers all to share as guests at your table; the piece of mind that is not afraid to say its peace.

Give us peace, Lord, that we may make peace with our sisters and brothers. Amen.