

12th July, A.D. 2009
6th Pentecost
Ephesians 1:1-14
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“Jesus sought me when a stranger wandering from the fold of God; he, to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.”

A well-respected man, a scholar, the type of guy who is successful by worldly standards is filled with hate. Hatred has darkened his heart. What is he afraid of? Why the hate? He has everything. Is it power? Is he threatened by someone or something else? Driven by hate, he is on a mission. He has a purpose, and that purpose is murder. His eyes are closed to everything else around him as he gallops down Damascus road. Imagine. You’ve felt hatred before.

Be honest. You are Paul. Maybe you've had no desire to murder anyone, but if you've lived long enough, you've probably experienced this type of intense hatred that made you want to act. The hatred temporarily blinded you. It blurred everything else. Maybe you did act. Maybe you said something you regretted later. Or maybe you never even regretted it. You fed on the hatred and enjoyed the pain you caused.

Remember what Luke said about Paul? "He was a man who was breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" (Acts 9:1). Paul is galloping along with

this hate when he is literally knocked off his horse! He his knocked off his murderous path! A light from heaven flashed around him and he fell to the ground—that's what happens in the presence of God. For three days Paul was struck blind. Then it was Jesus who restored his vision. Jesus opened his eyes so that Paul could truly see. This is the God whom we serve. A God who pursues us and redeems us, regardless of the path we're on. Even regardless of our response to him sometimes.

There are plenty of discussions and theological papers centered on salvation. I'm not going to focus on what all the intellectual arguments

are. I'd like for us to put ourselves in Paul's shoes this morning. A man, a wretched man he even called himself, who had a murderous heart against Christians. Let's be reminded that we serve a God who (1) pursues us and (2) redeems us for His glory, not ours.

God pursues us. Look at verse one. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. The man who persecuted and cursed Christians is now a leader in the Christian community. Not only a leader but carries the authority of the apostolic office?! Yes-because it was God's will. Paul recognized the pursuit of God in his life. Probably through the testimony of those he

persecuted. And Paul, St. Paul-the great theologian and philosopher served Christ and the Church. And I believe it is in Paul's letter here that we see him share the concept of God's sovereignty and providence. That Paul an apostle by the will of God. And then Paul reminds the Ephesian Church of God's love for them.

The far reaching arc of the bible--as I've always said--is God's initiation. From Creation, to the Fall of Adam & Eve, to the Eschaton of Christ; time after time we see God move; pursue.

The most tragic story of all of human history is the story of Adam

& Eve. Why is this? Well, the root of all marital strife, division in humanity, greed, lust, scheming against one another, and apathy can be found in that terrible story in Genesis 3. Harvey Cox in his book *On Not leaving it to the Snake*; theorizes that it was not so much Eve's disobedience that got her in trouble, but her feeble surrender of responsibility which preceded it, not her pride but her sloth." Cox says that "apathy is the key form of sin in today's world. For Adam & Eve apathy meant letting a snake tell them what to do. It meant abdicating...the exercise of dominion and control of the world." Apathy- you know what it means- lack of emotion and interest-being

indifferent, can be just as damaging to our soul as intense hatred like Paul's. Inaction, or slothfulness can blind us as well.

Hatred and Apathy alike are an abandonment of whom we were created to be. We often like to say others are responsible for our actions. Those Christians are causing my problems. And what about the common defense of many Nazi war criminals? We were just following orders. Or Adam & Eve, the snake made us do it. Better yet, I wasn't there! How can I be held liable? Or maybe we intentionally lie or mislead someone to advance ourselves? Do we excuse our behavior despite our profession of

faith? “Behold, I was shapen in wickedness, and in sin hath my mother conceived me” David exclaims in Psalm 51.

The Bible takes sin seriously because it takes humanity seriously. How many times have you heard people exclaim: how can he or she be responsible for their actions? It was a crime of passion. Or he was intoxicated. Or their childhood caused it. No matter the reason, it still points back to our sinful natures. Part of the glory of being human is that we do get to act—but we can act for our selves only and then suffer the consequences. To say that people are not to be held accountable is to deny the basic

principle that we have a problem: “Behold, I was shapen in wickedness, and in sin hath my mother conceived me.” There in lies the problem of who we are. Who we are individually, corporately, and culturally. You know, it was your fault that I made a C+ on my exam because you would not let me look on yours. I actually heard someone say that one time.

But there is good news in all this. We serve a God who pursues us. One of the most poignant, subtle, yet powerful conversion moments I’ve ever heard was from the great intellectual C.S.Lewis. Just like Paul, he was a well-respected scholar. Now he didn’t set out to

murder anyone, but his apathy towards God had been real. He often belittled Christians and his good friend Tolkien with the sharp sword of his words and writing. But after years and years of dismissing God as a myth, he began to feel, as an English poet quipped, the Hound of Heaven after him. Lewis writes in his autobiography:

“You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired NOT to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929, I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed. Perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the

Divine humility which will accept a convert on such terms.”

Lewis was pursued. He wasn't on a horse, he wasn't planning to kill anyone, but he was blind. Think about your own belief. Your own faith. Maybe we need reminding sometimes of our former blindness. Take heart today in Paul's conversion. It is a love story between God and his creation. May we be reminded that God pursues and accepts us at our worst.

But the love story doesn't end with the pursuit. We are also, like Paul, redeemed by this awe-inspiring Agape love. “He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ,

according to the purpose of his will.” Notice how God’s plan is directly related to his love for us. As he has purchased us through the saving merit of his son, he does so out of perfection. There is no ill will with God- no mistakes- no accidents-just his plan for us to acknowledge his holiness and greatness. Note here what Paul says about salvation. As Jesus redeems us-as he saves us from ourselves- there is praise. This praise is to the glory of his grace. The beauty of his grace he saves you. Then it only gets better. Paul goes on to say in this glory to God that it is freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. Do you see the richness of your faith? God in his good plan and purpose,

wills for your life to be reconciled to himself by his grace which is freely bestowed upon us-in the Beloved. Which means, in the passion of Christ, in his trials and temptations, in his death we find life. And then Paul carries it further. In him we have redemption. Redemption-do you know the power of this word? What we did wrong and cannot fix whether it is through monetary payoff or through some other means it is forgiven. When someone offends—when we are the recipients of others’ hatred--how is it that we can truly forgive? Because we have been so gloriously forgiven ourselves that if we claim Christ there is no escape from granting forgiveness to each other.

How can this be? Look at the text- we have forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. That's how much God loves your brokenness. That's how much God loves you even though your shaped by sin in your mothers womb. There is no sin that is beyond God's will and purpose. We see that in Paul, we see that in God's pursuit of the Israelites, in his pursuit of C.S. Lewis, a modern intellectual, and hopefully you see that in your on life.

A wretched man I am, Paul says. Who am I to boast in but Christ alone. Paul knew he couldn't save himself. He knew that his actions

went far beyond the scope of self-help and realization. It is part of the glory of being human that we are held accountable for our actions. Then, when we acknowledge our sin and guilt, we receive God's forgiveness, entering into the joy of his salvation, and so become yet more completely human and healthy. And this is accomplished because of God's will and purpose.

We are pursued and we are redeemed.

We may not always choose the right response, but as Christians we can appeal to a Savior. Jesus Christ. Our only mediator and advocate.

“Jesus sought me when a stranger wandering from the fold of God; he, to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.” Interposed his precious blood. God, the intruder! That’s what that line means. God-the one who put himself between my sin and the way of death to a living hope in Christ our Lord.

Amen.