

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Ephesians 3:1-12

¹ This is the reason that I, Paul, am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you gentiles, ² for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you ³ and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, ⁴ a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. ⁵ 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: ⁶ that is, the gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

⁷ 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. ⁸ 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 ⁹ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have access in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Once again, Christmas Day and New Year's Day have come and gone. The celebrations are over for most of us; and the decorations are slowly being taken down and put away. Our lives return to the path we were on before the holidays arrived.

With the start of a new year many of us consider it to be a time, an opportunity for us to begin life with a clean slate. We might ask ourselves "Now what?" What will the new year bring? Many people ask themselves, what changes can I make in my life to make it better? Some people may have made New Year's resolutions and are determined to follow through with their plans to make changes in their lives to achieve their goals. But if we stop and think about it, we don't need a special secular day to tell us that we haven't been on the right course of life, and to do better, we need to formulate a plan to make our lives better. If that's what we think, than I believe we set ourselves up for failure.

All of those things we promise ourselves to do or stop doing will not be accomplished, even if we make a plan, if they are based merely on a personal wish. The future is full of unknowns that may interrupt our plans or distract our focus. Our will to accomplish goals may weaken our efforts. Who we are, what we do and say, how we face the unknown, begins with deeper internal, spiritual beliefs and connections.

According to Psychology Today, resolutions fail because they don't get to the real heart of what's going on inside of us. "We don't develop self-destructive behaviors because we're weak, or because 'they just became a habit,' or because everyone around us was doing them, or because of our neurobiology or heredity," says psychologist Michael Bader. "The meaning of these behaviors is unconscious, and we develop them because they serve unconscious beliefs and needs. These beliefs and needs are important, albeit unconscious, building blocks of our identities. They provide a sense of unconscious safety and changing them is unconsciously experienced as dangerous."

The cartoon character, Popeye, the Sailor Man, used to say. "I yam what I yam and that's all that I yam." Some people make excuses for their negative behaviors and attitudes by saying they can't change. It's just who they are. But if the beliefs that we have and who we are change, and take root in our deeper selves, we do indeed change.

The Apostle Paul testifies to this truth as revealed to us through Jesus Christ. Paul uses his own life as an example. The letter to the Ephesians was written during a time when Paul was imprisoned in Rome. It certainly was not the best of times for Paul; however, Paul embraced the call he was given from God and did not waiver.

He was not in prison because he did anything wrong. He was there because the religious leaders in Jerusalem, who felt threatened by Christ's teachings and did not believe Jesus was the Messiah, pressured the Romans to arrest Paul and bring him to trial for treason and causing a rebellion among the Jews. Paul appealed his case and asked for it to be brought before the emperor. While he was waiting for his trial to begin, Paul held on to his faith and continued to believe that God was in control of all that happened to him, no matter how it all ended.

If we break this down, the first thing we need to understand is that Paul knew who he had been and who he was now. He knew he was a forgiven imperfect child of God, called by God for a particular mission. That was made quite clear to him when he had his conversion experience, while he was hunting down to rid his homeland of converted Jews seeking to follow Jesus. It was during the encounter he had with Jesus that day, and the period of blindness that followed, that his life was changed.

Not all of us have dramatic "come to Jesus" moments like Paul did. For many it happens as a gradual, subtle, and subversive kind of encounter presented to us through scriptures, church, and other Christians. Others may recognize our need for Christ, or they recognize God's work in us before we do, and they nurture us into the moment of discovery. And then, the journey begins. Through God's grace, we become aware of who we are, God's children, chosen for fulfilling God's purposes.

Paul knew he was chosen to take the message of the Good News of Jesus to the Gentiles. Although there are scriptures from the Old Testament such as Isaiah 49:6 where the prophet announces that God will give his servant, "as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth," this remained a mystery to the Jews.

However, the Old Testament scriptures did not reveal that the Gentiles and the Jews would become equal in the body of Christ. This remained a mystery to the Jews, and Paul knew he was called to actively participate in the disclosure of the truths of this mystery. Because Paul believed in God's plan, he no longer focused on himself, but on God's mission and what it would mean to the lives of others. He accepted his imprisonment, knowing God would bring purpose from it to further God's mission.

Paul's message reveals to us that because of his deep belief in God, his acceptance of his worth to God, and the mission given to him by God; he could trust God to show him an open door, and empower him to use any opportunity put before him, including his imprisonment, to bring others to salvation through Jesus.

As a Christian, asking ourselves, "What now?" we extend an invitation to God to change us by leading us on the journey of discovery and deepening our understanding of who we are in His eyes. We are changed from the inside-out. We become what we believe. As a Christian we believe and embrace God's plan for the world, to bring all people to him and his will. Think what that would mean to the betterment of our world. And as a Christian we believe we are servants to

God's mission to the world. We accept and pursue the fulfillment of our mission. One by one, and as a church, we become a light to others.

It doesn't take a theological degree to witness to the faith. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, pioneer psychologist of death and dying, tells the story of one very ordinary person who sowed hope everywhere she went, just by telling her story.

The doctor was visiting terminally ill patients in a hospital, interviewing them, and noting their outlook on life. One ward in particular seemed filled with patients who were relentlessly sunny, upbeat, positive about their condition -- even though their medical prognoses were no better than anyone else's.

After much investigation, Kübler-Ross managed to identify the single common denominator, the one factor those hopeful patients shared in common. It was one particular cleaning woman.

"What are you doing with my patients?" Kübler-Ross demanded to know once she'd caught up with her.

Initially the woman was hesitant to answer. She was sure she'd done something wrong. After the doctor reassured her, she revealed that she took extra time to sit with the patients and hold their hands. Often, she shared with them the story of how she had held her own dying child on her lap, and how death no longer held any fear for her. "But you see, doctor," she explained, "the dying patients are just like old acquaintances to me, and I'm not afraid to touch them, to talk with them, to offer them hope."

In all her years of medical school, Kübler-Ross had never learned this sort of therapy. Who could teach it in the classroom, anyway? Even if you taught medical students to memorize the cleaning woman's words and parrot them back, they wouldn't have the ring of authenticity. In pushing her broom in and out of those rooms and gently demonstrating how death is simply a part of life, this woman of faith made of her own story a therapeutic treatment.

(--Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Life Lessons: Two Experts in Death and Dying Teach Us about the Mysteries of Death and Living* (Scribner, 2001), 54.)

Yes, the new year may challenge us to examine our beliefs and the way they might turn into action. Our own goals are less important than what results when we respond to God's call for us to go out and do the work of God's kingdom. What is more gratifying than knowing we are loved by God, chosen by God, pleasing God when we fulfill our call from him, and knowing we lead others to him? Really, considering who God is, what can possibly be more gratifying than this?

On this Epiphany Sunday, we remember the story of three Wisemen with A spark of belief in a message foretold, were captivated by the light of a bright shining large star, embarked on a long journey to follow the star. They were drawn by the light to discover the mystery that awaited them. Even though they encountered a jealous King, feeling threatened by the prophecies of a promised Messiah, they were not distracted from their mission. They followed the star and found the newborn king. God spoke to them in a dream and warned them not to return to Herod to tell him where they found the baby. They heard, they understood, and they were obedient, and so our Savior survived the threat of King Herod. The wise men's lives were changed. They embraced the mystery, believed, they were obedient to their call, and God's mission was a success. Amen.