

Words on the Wall: Gathered, Protected, and Preserved

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Rev. Peter Jonker

Ephesians 1:3-14

So what we have here is something like a pregame speech. Paul is like a coach giving a pep talk to his team before the big game. Paul is trying to rally the Ephesian church and rally us to live as God's people. It won't be easy. The opponent is fierce. And so Coach Paul gives us this pregame word. Coaches employ different strategies when it comes to motivating their teams. So, for example, a lot of coaches use "bulletin board material" as a way to motivate their squad. Sports fans will know what I'm talking about, but for the sake of you non-sports fans let me explain. When a coach uses bulletin board material as a motivator, he finds negative things that other people have said about his team and he posts them on the bulletin board in the locker room. It could be something negative that the press has said about the team, or, better still, it could be something your opponent has said about you. So, here's a purely hypothetical case: maybe one player on a college football team that wears mostly maize and blue calls an opposing team, maybe one that wears green and white, their "little brothers." The other team is like a bunch of little brothers who try to keep up with his older sibling but can't. That's bulletin board material. A coach could take that and put it on a billboard and right before their next game he could say, 'Do you remember what those people said about us! Do you remember how they disrespected us! Well... let's go out there and show them that little brother is all grown up!' That could happen. That's how bulletin board material works. And it does work. It fires teams up, it brings them together around a common enemy. The team is unified by a joint sense of outrage and they become laser-focused on the task at hand.

You know who also uses the bulletin board method to rally the team. Preachers. When we are trying to motivate the team, when we are trying to rally the troops, when we are trying to fire you up, there's nothing like some good bulletin board material. We find some outrageous practice out there in the world, we find some outrageous statement that puts the church in a bad light made by an important person, and we start our sermon by holding up in front of you and saying, "Did you hear what that person said!? We are under attack! We have got to stand up for ourselves!" Preachers have been doing this forever. When I was a kid the bulletin board material usually came from another church whose beliefs differed from ours. "Those Arminians deny the electing love of God! Be on your guard against the Arminian error! The truth is under attack!" Nowadays preachers do the same thing, but they are much more likely to mention practices out there in the world, things that secular people are saying and doing. "Be on your guard against those people!" I've preached dozens of sermons like that. Usually they start with a Troubling Story followed shortly by an Alarming Statistic. It's a great way to get people fired up. There's nothing like a shared sense of outrage to bring people together. Now... we need these warnings in the church. False teaching is real, and the church needs to be warned against it. Heaven knows there are lots of troubling stories and alarming trends out there in the world that threaten the church and the witness of the gospel. Heaven knows the church needs to arm itself against those things. But the bulletin board approach has limits. The bulletin board approach is negative. It starts from fear, it fosters outrage, and it builds a community based on a sense of dislike of someone else.

And besides, here's an interesting thing, while we face opposition in the modern western church, and while people do say nasty things about us, it's nothing compared to the opposition

faced by the early church. Paul knew that. Paul planted many of those early churches and he faced hostility wherever he went. This wasn't just the occasional nasty story in the media, this was real physical menace. Paul was jailed in Ephesus, jailed in Rome, jailed in Philippi, threatened in Iconium, beaten and left for dead in Lystra. He was sneered at in Athens and harassed in Thessalonica. Read 2 Corinthians 11 and you hear Paul lay out the specifics. If you belonged to one of these little churches scattered throughout the Roman Empire, you would have faced opposition every day. It's not like that for us. The closest thing in this country might be church in Zuni, New Mexico. My colleague Jim Kuiper who now leads a church in California, once spent three years teaching in Zuni at the small church plant there. Zuni is a modern place where you have a little of that sense of early church opposition. The Zuni tribe jealously guards its religious traditions, and the church is viewed by most as a threat to the old ways. Jim said that when you walk around town you feel a kind of Spiritual weight, a spiritual force pushing against you. That sense is strongest during their annual Shalako ceremony where tribal religious figures get together for Spiritual rituals. During that time, Jim said, the sense of Spiritual opposition was palpable. That's what it would have felt like all the time in Ephesus. If you walked to church in Ephesus you would have walked under the shadow of great pagan temples and past the stares of suspicious people. If Paul wanted to take the bulletin board approach, he could have had so much material. If Paul wanted to rally the troops he could have said, 'We are under attack! Watch out! They hate us! Let me tell you what they did to me in Philippi! We've got to fight those people!'

But that's not what Coach Paul does, is it? What does he do? First of all what is Paul's tone? Here's a fun fact about Ephesians 1. In the Greek, verses 3-10 are all one sentence. It is five sentences in our church Bible, but in the Greek, Paul let's those five sentences spill out in one breathless exclamation. Paul is gushing. It's the tone of a 19 year old college boy coming back to his dorm after a first date with a girl from his Stats class. As soon as he gets in his room he gushes to his roommate about this girl: "Oh my goodness she's so wonderful she's smart I bet she's the smartest girl in class she always knows the answer but she's never proud about it always totally humble which is incredible because she's absolutely gorgeous even in jeans and a sweatshirts she takes my breath away and did I mention that she loves accordion music just like me and loves to go to polka concerts I mean how many people are like that and what are the chances..." He gushes. It's what people do when they are completely smitten; carried away with excitement and joy. That's Paul in this passage. He is completely smitten with what Jesus has done for him! He is gushing about the promises that are ours in Christ Jesus. The church might be facing enormous pressure and opposition, but you'd never know it from the opening to this letter. It's enormously hopeful.

So that's the tone. What about the content? Again amazingly positive. The church in Ephesus might be under the shadow of pagan temples, but listen to all the positive things Paul says about the church. "Church in Ephesus, you think you are a frail new church plant struggling to take root in this hostile town? That's not how I see you. You have been chosen in Christ before the beginning of the World. You have a root that goes back before the beginning of time (verse 4) and, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit, a deposit guaranteeing your eternal inheritance. You have a root anchored in the end of time (verse 13). You think you're young and struggling? Hah! In Christ you are eternal!" "You think of yourself as weak people: slaves and common laborers, people of low status and small power. That's not how I see you. In Jesus you have been adopted children of almighty God (verse 5). You are sons and daughters of the King!" You think you are hopeless underdogs and have no chance against the forces out there. That's not how I see you. You belong to Jesus and at the end, when the times reach their fulfillment,

everything on heaven and earth will be brought under him (verse 10). You are champions! You are undefeated! You are more than conquerors!”

You see, when Paul grounds the church, he doesn't start with bulletin board material. He doesn't point to the opposition and the terrible things it says and does, instead he points to Christ and the surpassingly wonderful things Jesus has done. When it comes to our source of focus and unity it's pretty clear that he doesn't want us to rally first of all in opposition to the fearful things out there, he doesn't want the center of the church to be fear and opposition; he wants the center of the church to be faith, hope and love. He wants us to rally around the grace and love that has been lavished on us in Christ Jesus. It's not like Paul is aware of the opposition. At the end of this letter he will talk about the slings and arrows of the evil one and call us to be on our guard, and he'll talk about the dangerous winds of false doctrine, and he'll talk about the dangers of anger and lying and bitterness. But these things are not his starting point. His starting point is the eternal grace of Jesus which has taken hold of us all.

You know who gets this? The catechism. The catechism knows the starting point of the church. When it asks us what we believe about the holy catholic church there is nothing about what we must do, there's nothing about watching out for the thing out there, there is only the unshakable reality of what God has done for us in Jesus: “I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And of this community I am and always will be a living member.” That's a pretty good coach's pep talk, isn't it? No negative bulletin board material there; only the eternal hope of the promises that are ours in Jesus; Jesus our captain and head, who has already won the victory for us.

What does this mean for us in our Monday morning lives? What does this mean practically for you profession of faith and table fellowship people? Maybe something like this. When you think of the church, pay attention to where you start. If you start with the people of the church, you will be anxious. Because we will disappoint you. I will let you down. Bob will probably let you down. The person sitting next to you in the pew will let you down. If your hope for the church starts with the strength of these people, you will be disappointed. If you start with the problems in the world you will be overwhelmed. There are a lot of people who are making dire predictions about the position of the church in society. They are saying things are going to get harder. We will be more and more marginalized. Those people are probably right. So if you start with the opposition you will not sleep well at night. But if you start with Jesus...if you start with the One who gathers, protects and preserves us...if you start with the One who has conquered every power and authority and blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing...well... you might be able to walk out into all kinds of opposition and respond with faith, hope and love.

I don't usually do this, but I'd like to close by offering a suggestion of a way to keep fear and negativity at bay, and make Christ's work your starting point. See if sometime during your day, the beginning of the day would be great, but any time will do, see if you can read the first three chapters of Ephesians. Those are the passages where Paul gushes. Try to do that every day for a week. Read those three chapters and let them give shape to your day. Let them be your coach's pep talk. You won't hear anything about the terrible opposition out there; you won't hear anything about what you need to do; you will hear about the wonderful things God has done for you in Christ Jesus.