

Hidden/revealed, formerly/but now, far off/but near

Ephesians 3:14-21

A Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Every Sunday in the Prayer of the Day, we pray for all those who have a particular sorrow, need, or difficulty. Sometimes that that goes by us as kind of a general statement without thinking that there are particular sorrows, needs, or difficulties. They are among us and also in our own hearts and lives. It sometimes important to try to be specific about that because we struggle ourselves, and sometimes are asked by others. Someone will come to you and say: "I'm 93 years old, and what's the point of it? I'm sitting here. It hurts to move. I have nothing worthwhile to do, and I'm no good to others. Why is God doing this?"

Or when we turn on the news, we hear about the ghastly things that happen to others. People will say: "Where is God in all of this?" Or there are those terrible illnesses and weaknesses that creep up on us, disable and hamper us. There is the vicious inhumanity of man to man, the torture and slaughter of innocents, and also the downright meanness and cruelty that often hides behind smiling faces. How can God allow that?

Or as Psalm 73:3 asks: "How can the wicked prosper?" They do all kinds of evil things, and it doesn't bother them. Why do the wicked prosper, and those of us who try to do the right thing aren't doing so well? Might as well go with the flow.

What do Christians say to this? There's a lot of pop religion around and proverbs that people throw out, like "It's always darkest before the dawn." That's not what it's really about.

Nor are we talking about fox-hole religion: "O, Lord, get me out of this foxhole and I'll change my life." That kind of resolve usually doesn't stick. It's a way of trying to manipulate God.

Why does all the terrible evil around us exist? Of course, the dilemma is obvious. On the one hand, God is all powerful. On the other hand, God is loving. If he is all powerful, why isn't it all loving? But, if he's not all powerful, he can't really love. And if he is all powerful, the way things are going, he's a monster.

We get caught in that obvious kind of thinking.

The poet John Milton talked about justifying the ways of God to man. The technical term for this is "theodicy." It really is judging God. It's a ridiculous thing. It's almost a cartoon of a Job-like person shaking his fist at the heavens. Or the other way this works is when one of us thinks or says: "God, you really should do it differently. If you and I could work together, I could just tell you how to straighten things out. I could help you do this right." This is also pretty ridiculous. But as you know, it happens all the time.

With that we come to the Letter to the Ephesians. If we look at these first three chapters of Ephesians, even though it's not a story or a parable, it is the basic story. You recall in Ephesians 1:4: "He has chosen you before the foundation of the world." Then in Ephesians 1:9-10, it says:

"For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

The underlying pulse of the first three chapters of Ephesians is found in three polarities: It's hidden/revealed, formerly/but now, far off/but near. If you see that, you see there's a basic rhythm, a basic sense, and what it's basically saying is that the mystery, the mystery of it all, is now revealed. It's in the cross, by the blood of the cross, that this all has been revealed and made near.

How do we convey that? We come back to the tragedies that afflict us and others and how we struggle with it all. The answer is not available to those who are not basically committed to the Christian witness. Paul in 2 Cor 4:3-4 specifically says this is veiled to those who are perishing, but of course it is unveiled in Christ and the cross.

Or to say, and this is not meant flippantly, as 2 Corinthians 1:20 does (paraphrase): "The cross is the answer. What is the question?" ("All the promises of God find their Yes in him.")

How does this work specifically? First of all, in the basic ordinary life we live we want to remember that what the Lord did was to create cosmos out of chaos. He created order and that ordering is there, and we rejoice in it. An example is medicine, which is part of his ordering. He gives us the gift of reason to deal with things.

But, of course, things ultimately don't go right, and it's important to remember that in Romans 8:19-22 it says that nature itself is caught in futility, in bondage to decay, groaning, and waiting for redemption and freedom. So we mustn't say; Well that's the final word. There is evil, real evil, and there's a battle going on. But the Lord is working in this to create order.

In the second place, in these three chapters, especially in Ephesians 2 and 3, the writer talks about the church. It is a place where there is to be help for us in all kinds of terrible things that happen. And we are called upon to help.

In one sense, however, the church is no help at all. If you look at the history of the church, it surely is not like a mighty army. It is actually a terrible story of how people have acted. As Karl Barth said: "The greatest proof for the existence of God is that the gospel continues in spite of the church." Nevertheless, the church is where the Gospel of freedom in the cross of Jesus Christ comes to us, and we are called to that.

Then there is basically that central and key event of all time called God came in Jesus Christ and died and rose again for you and me. The cross. It's not only what was and is now, but it is also what is now and what is forever. That's what we're talking about. What is forever? It's because of what has been in the now, which is what Jesus Christ has done.

Here are a couple of illustrations which help show what it's like.

Some has said that it's like looking at a tapestry or something woven. On one side you see the pattern, but we're on the other side and so it's all confused. Nevertheless, the Lord is Lord. Thank the Lord.

The second illustration comes from the historian Herbert Butterfield who said (paraphrase): "It's like we're all in a big orchestra, and each one of us has an instrument. The Lord is the conductor, his baton is the cross. And when there's a false note, he rewrites the music to make harmony."

Similar to this is the saying: The Lord writes straight with crooked lines.

To come back to the Bible itself: "The Lord has made it all right in the cross" – is the message of these first three chapters of Ephesians. It's the message of the Gospel. We remember the last verse of the Gospel of Matthew: ". . . lo, I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20). Of course, that in Hebrew is Immanuel. Amen