

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 3.14.2021



## Predicting the Future

**The Reverend Pen Peery**

Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.

All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are



what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

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Our second Scripture lesson is from the letter to the Ephesians. We are, of course, in the season of Lent – a time when we reflect on the length to which Jesus went to express God’s love. Lent is a time for us not only to consider the cost of Jesus’ action, but what that means for us as Christ’s disciples.

Listen with me for God’s word. I am the reading the first ten verses of chapter two:

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Today marks the year anniversary of the now familiar concept of “virtual worship.” March 15, 2020 – I remember how absolutely bizarre it was to stand here and look out over empty pews...and I remember thinking how strange it would be to worship like this for the few weeks I thought it would take before things got back to normal.

52 Sundays later – here we are!

One lesson the last year has confirmed for us – in a big way – is that it is difficult to predict the future. Because – even without a global pandemic – the future is a mystery.

Another lesson the last year has confirmed for us – in a big way – is that we tend to not like mysteries. Mysteries make us nervous because they remind us of the



inconvenient fact that we are not in control.

Maybe you've had an experience like the one I have every once in a while.

It's 3:00 in the morning and you are awake in the bed – thinking about the future.

Maybe you're thinking about finances. Maybe it's about an unpleasant conversation you need to have. Maybe you're worked up over work, or your family, or your health.

There's nothing you can actually do. It's the middle of the night. There's no real way to know how the thing that's keeping you awake is going to turn out. But you make a list anyway. Pros and cons. Things to do. Talking points for what you might need to say. Then, and only then, you might drift back off asleep.

Perhaps in less anxious ways, we try to take charge of our future during the daylight hours. We create financial and retirement plans. We set itineraries for long-delayed vacations. We hit "repeat" for recurring meetings on our calendar. Through the miracle of science, we reveal the gender of the baby that is six months from being born.

It doesn't always work. Sometimes – maybe even most of the time – things turn out a little different than we expected. But the very act of planning itself feels good because it gives us a feeling of control. It helps us think we can get our arms around the mysterious nature of the future.

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Over the past year, I've made a lot of lists and a lot of plans.



But I confess, there is one way of taking charge of my future I used to be fastidious about which I have recently neglected: dental appointments. I guess it just didn't feel urgent, considering everything else that was going on.

A couple of weeks ago I finally got back to my dentist. I was due for a cleaning around the time COVID hit – so it had been a while. In fact, when I went in for my appointment I realized that a lot had changed. Like: my old hygienist and dentist had retired and been replaced by new people, and most of the technology they used seemed to be a serious upgrade. Let's just say my appointment took a little longer than I expected.

After the torture...I mean, cleaning...was over, the dentist came in the room to give me the once over. It was your typical dentist-patient conversation: he asked questions while his hands were in my mouth and I tried my best to mumble answers.

Post-exam we had the chance to truly visit, and discovered that we were just about the same age, and had been at Carolina at the same time. We played the name game...and then the most unexpected thing happened: we wept. Two middle-aged fathers – patient and doctor – together in a medical office building late on a Thursday morning...we wept together.

We had discovered a common connection – a friend to each of us – who had been from his hometown and had been an important part of my campus ministry family at UNC. Katherine was bright, winsome, and strong. She was fiercely loyal as a friend and had a wry sense of humor. She and I had spent summers in Montreat –



both growing up and on summer staff. She had been like a sister to my dentist... navigating small town life and sticking up for one another.

Katherine graduated with me in 1999.

I found out she had cancer two summers later.

In 2002 she lost her battle. She was 25 years old.

The tears that my dentist and I shed were certainly because we were not expecting to remember a friend who we'd lost so long ago. That's one way that grief is sneaky – it catches you up short when you least expect it.

But – at least for me – the tears were about more than grief; they were about putting me in touch with my fear.

Katherine was the first friend who was my age to die. I think for many of those who were her friends, Katherine's death was our first brush with our own mortality. The first time we really confronted the mystery of death – and what lay beyond it. The first time we really came face-to-face with how fragile our lives were, and just how much of an illusion it was to think we were in control.

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The theologian Reinhold Niehbur – writing about the human condition – said that it is when we bump into our own mortality that we become anxious and that it is when we become anxious that we have the tendency to sin. For Niehbur, a common definition of sin is when human beings overreach and try to take charge of that which is not ours to control.



I'm quite sure that the writer of today's Scripture in Ephesians (who calls himself Paul) didn't have a systematic theology worked out in his head, but he writes with an awareness that the people who will read his letter shrink in the face of the mystery of death – and he wants to instill them with confidence.

So, in the words of my friend, Donovan Drake, like the ghost in Dickens' Christmas classic, Paul takes us by the hand and drags us into the future so that we can see past the mystery we fear, starting first at our graves.

“You were dead,” he begins. “You were dead through trespasses and sins... following the desires of flesh and senses...and by nature are children of wrath... like everyone else.”

OK. Admittedly, not a great start if Paul writes to instill confidence, but he whisks us on past our graves to announce the great news: that for even sinful, broken people like us, God has “raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.”

This is what Paul wants us to see! He gives us a glimpse of the future – not the future that tells us whether or not we will make our retirement number, or whether our kids or grandkids will turn out alright – but, rather a more cosmic, eternal future.

Just before today's passage, Paul writes that God “has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a



plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

All of our hopes. All of our fears. All of our brokenness. All of our overreach. All of our insecurities. All of our failures. All of our past. All of our illusions about the future. By the sheer gift of grace, God gathers all of it in the reality of Christ's death and resurrection. It is no longer a mystery – or something for us to fear. On the cross, we see God's intention for our future. "To gather up all things in him... things in heaven and on earth."

This is great...grand...news! Good news of such proportion that – frankly – sometimes we have trouble wrapping our minds around it.

Sometimes – because it goes so far beyond our expectations and sensibilities – we try to trim it down. "Surely, what Paul meant to say, is that God will gather up 'some' things...not all. You know, the good, the righteous, the repentant, the pure..."

But that's not what Paul said.

This question of how widely God draws the circle, or if God draws a circle at all, to determine who is included in those gathered with him in the heavenly places is certainly one that generates a lot of discussion among the faithful. And – someday – that will be another mystery to be revealed.

What Paul encourages is for us to focus on the grace – a grace that saves us – not by our own doing or by our own works – but through the free gift of God.



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Knowing and trusting God's intention about the future transforms how we live our lives in the present.

That is really the essence of faith – to invest these precious lives we've been given for the sake of one another and the One who is still at work to make all things new.

Not to squander our lives by numbing away the pain we feel.

Not chasing after things that never truly satisfy.

But by living in light of God's promise – and God's promised rest – which almost always bears the fruit of kindness and justice and mercy.

Of the many people who have been mentors in the faith for me – a common characteristic is that they were confident when it came to approaching the future.

One of my primary mentors is someone I have preached about in this pulpit before: my paternal grandmother, Agnes Peery.

Grandmom lived a life that was full: of joy, pain, love, loss. The child of Presbyterian missionaries, she grew up on the steady diet of God's promises in Scripture – and these informed her at every fork in her journey.

When I knew her, the glaucoma had taken most of her sight.

But, though she couldn't read, she would still tell my sister and me the stories about Moses and Jonah...about Jesus and Peter...about hope and forgiveness.



When we visited her, we would always make it to church. And when it came time to stand up and sing the hymns, grandmom didn't need a hymnal or a page number. She would hear the tune, and launch right in. Always nailing the first verse...maybe a little shaky in the middle...but strong again on the last stanza.

The lasting memory I have of Grandmom – and, perhaps, a metaphor for us to hold today as we consider how Paul wants us to live – is in her home church at my Grandfather's funeral.

Standing there – blind and frail – confronting the mystery of death – she lifted her gaze and raised her voice as she trusted in the promise of everlasting life while singing with gusto.

May it be so with us – who are gathered in God's promises.

Amen.

