

# *Wading River Congregational Church*

## **SERMONS IN PRINT**

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**JANUARY 10, 2010**



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### **Ephesians 1:1-14**

### *"God's Plan"*

Some weeks, some months, have us asking: what's going on? Our world is confused and divided as we enter a new decade. Stability is hard to find, and uncertainty trickles down into every corner of life – nation, community, family. Where are things headed? Is there anyone in charge? If God has a plan, what is it? If he does, how do we fit into it?

#### *1) Everything In Conformity With His Purpose*

Well yes, God has a plan, he has a purpose, and he works everything into it. That's what it means to be God! He is not taken by surprise by world events or people's decisions, and he has the power to bring everything into alignment with his purposes. It is also his *pleasure* to do so!

The opening passage of Paul's "sermon" (it's more that than a "letter") to the Gentile Christians in and around the city of Ephesus repeats over and over that God "*chose... [and] predestined people in Christ... in accordance with his pleasure and will*" to carry out a plan "*by his will according to his good pleasure, which he has purposed...*" and he is the one who "*works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.*" God is in control, and he knows where he is going and where his world is going.

So what has he done that would give us reason to believe this? The Father has "*chosen people in Christ to be holy... to be adopted as his*

*sons.*" His plan involves "a people;" first Abraham and his family, then Israel as a nation, then the redeemed in Christ. Their purpose was and is to be "a blessing to all nations... a light to the Gentiles... the light of the world."

God's plan to use fallible people to bless his world is based on what Jesus Christ has done. He has redeemed and forgiven the sins of those who believe in him; he has been the channel of God's grace, which has been poured out lavishly on undeserving people. He has given wisdom and understanding to his people so that they can grasp what grace means. He has given his Holy Spirit to them as a seal of ownership, to show that these people are now God's possession. He has given them spiritual blessings here and now; a taste, a down-payment, a deposit to assure them that "this is for real," and that they are now included in his plan and purpose.

Paul's long and rhetorical and repetitive introduction is designed to say: "All this you know already. But do you realize what it's all for?"

#### *2) God's Plan Revealed*

The key is in the words "*He made known to us the mystery of his will... which is to bring all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ.*"

The greatest blessing to God's "people in Christ," for which Paul blesses the Father, is that the mystery is now unveiled, God's will is finally revealed. His purpose is to re-unite his world. He is working to bring "all things" together. Where there is division and strife and alienation and confusion of tongues and competing ambitions, struggles for power and wealth, his purpose is to bring harmony, to bring peace and reconciliation, to bring in *shalom*.

And that will extend to harmony between people and God, between people and people, between people and all creation - and even between "the highest heavens" where God dwells and the "heavenly places" where evil still reigns. In God's plan, "*All things in heaven and on earth*" will be re-united and function with the harmony, the unity, the *shalom* for which God created them.

And, says Paul, "it's to us that this has been made known!" People who are "in Christ" have had this revealed to them! They know what God is up to, and if they meditate on it (which is what Paul's sermon is aimed at), they will see their role in God's plan. The whole of *Ephesians* is about God acting to restore harmony where there was once division: between God and fallen humans, between Jew and Gentile, within the church, within the community, within marriage and family and work, within the whole wide world.

### 3) *What Needs Re-Uniting?*

So comes the question, to 1<sup>st</sup> century and to 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians: "You already know all this about Christ bringing you adoption and redemption and forgiveness, but do you see how you fit into God's purposes? Do you know what you are to do with the spiritual blessings you now have?" What, in other words, is your role, what is our role, in this "re-uniting" project of God's?

Well the place to start is to ask what is now divided, what needs re-uniting? In Paul's world, that meant the division between Jews and Gentiles. Instead of being "a light to the Gentiles," Israel had become a religious nationalistic people, marked out from others by their ethnicity, their circumcision, their food laws, their Sabbath observance, and increasingly by detailed ritual washings, tithing, fasting. They were not like the Gentiles, they were God's people, going back to Abraham! Gentiles were "dogs" by comparison. When you visited them or their territories, you became unclean and needed ritual cleansing on your return - even to "shaking their dust off your sandals." That division, says Paul, will now be done away with in Christ. God has made a new people!

Slave and free were divided; the upper classes were hugely separated from the peasants; there was no "middle class." Society would be reformed in the Christian communities; slaves and owners would become "brothers in Christ." Men and women were divided; men half-despising and half fearing women, keeping them covered and separated and not even speaking in public to their own wives. All that would be done away with "in Christ." Men and women would be equally heirs of salvation and participants in the Christian community.

So much for the 1<sup>st</sup> century. What about the 21<sup>st</sup>? What is divided, and what is our role as Christians in healing those divisions? Where do we need to foster *shalom*? Start with those nearest and dearest. How's your family life? How's mine? What have we done in our generation as spouses and parents to promote harmony, or to provoke division? Two adults working, each with their own ambitions and career paths and schedules? Kids of all ages from kindergarten to high school scheduled every day, every afternoon, every evening, every weekend, for

some “improving” activity that will advance their college and career prospects?

Have we in fact shredded our families by the pursuit of “success” as defined in American suburbia? How can we start healing family life?

It surely needs it: fewer and fewer people even want to get married, family and even marriage are being redefined, half of marriages end in divorce, over 40% of babies are conceived by unmarried people. What Christian examples, what Christian ethics, what Christian priorities, can help our children and grand-children’s generations to have more harmonious family lives?

What about our communities? Why do we allow them to be defined by the divisive voices? Is anyone ready to work for harmony and unity and the common good? What about our county, state, nation? Will partisanship and division and power plays veto all hope for progress? Will the loudest and most divisive voices make government impossible?

Can the Christian community make a healing difference? Or do we at times only make the divisions worse by our condemnations? Are we ready to be part of God’s plan? Abraham was to be a blessing to all nations, Israel to be a light to the Gentiles; Christians are called to be *“the salt of the earth, the light of the world.”* When you come into a Christian community – that is, a church family – you are there supposed to find a living example of God’s plan at work; people united and living in harmony, marriages and families held together by love and support, values taught that promote what is good and right and true and noble and lovely.

We are supposed to be a model community! When people come in, they should over time be amazed at how different is the atmosphere here from that in their

workplaces or their neighborhoods. They should be touched deeply by how kindly people treat one another, how willing they are to help each other out; how loud or divisive voices do not prevail, how the constant call is to service, how in the church the way up is the way down.

And the Christian community is meant not only to be an example, but to be a community at work for the blessing of “the world;” reaching out to needy and hurting and lonely and sick people, confronting wrong-doing and injustice and prejudice and spiteful division wherever they meet it.

What is God up to? Re-uniting the world, his whole creation, starting with people like us! Of course that does not mean we are in any way superior; we are chosen by grace to be examples, the guinea pigs, the “demo,” the “floor model” that everyone can kick and poke. But if the faith we profess in Jesus Christ and his redemption; if our experience of the presence and fruit of the Spirit; if our grasp of the Father’s plan are all real, then we will withstand the world’s scrutiny, absorb their kicks, know that retaliation is forbidden, know to love and not despise or condemn others who have not yet received God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

But when they have been around us for a while, they should be hungry for the harmony, the unity, the *shalom* that by grace we enjoy, even now, in this imperfect age.

Let us pray...