

**“With My Whole Heart,
in the Company of the Upright, in the Congregation”
Psalm 111; I Kings 3:3-14; Ephesians 5:15-17
(First Post-Pandemic Public Worship for MPC)**

I Kings 3:3-12

³[King] Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places.

⁴The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.

⁵At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, “Ask what I should give you.”

⁶And Solomon said, “You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant—my father, David—because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today.

⁷And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. ⁸And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. ⁹Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?”

¹⁰It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, ¹²I now do according to your word.”

Ephesians 5:15-17

¹⁵Be careful then how you live (lit. “how you walk”),
not as unwise people but as wise,

¹⁶making the most of (lit. “redeeming”) the time,
because the days are evil.*

¹⁷So do not be foolish,
but understand what the will of the Lord is.

*(the opposite of “good” which seems to have a sense of one’s disposition toward the world. “The days aren’t here to be good to you; if anything, you can expect them to bring you some trouble.”)

Psalm 111

¹Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

²Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them.

³Full of honor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.

⁴He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.

⁵He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

⁶He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.

⁷The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.

⁸They are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

⁹He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.

Holy and awesome is his name.

¹⁰The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever.

The Sermon

What beliefs make you who you are—
 beliefs about God, or the world, or life,
 about what's good, what's essential,
 what's worth living for or fighting for or dying for?

And what do those beliefs tell you
 about how God is inviting you to live this one life well?

And how much difference does it make to you
 that you don't have to do this alone.
 You don't have to try to do it without God,
 and you don't have to try to do it without these people
 from whom we have had to be separated for so long,
 and still have to maintain some distance
 in order to protect their lives and their health—
 these people who know each other as our congregation?

In *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, Bill Bryson made accessible the scientific hypothesis that “there is no place where you can stand at the center [of the universe] and say: ‘This is where it all began. This is the centermost point of it all.’”

Bryson says, “We are all at the center of it all. Actually,” he said, “we don't know that for sure; we can't prove it mathematically. Scientists just assume that we can't really be the center of the universe—think what that would imply—but that the phenomenon must be the same for all observers in all places. Still,” he said, “we don't actually know.”ⁱ

Christianity, which in the Disciples' time was called *The Way* (as in, the road, which is both the route *to* somewhere, *and* the means of *getting* there), says that at the center of the universe—the universe as we know it, as much or as little as we do—there is a cross.

On that cross, someone named Jesus was crucified, who was the Son of God, the embodiment of what it means to be fully human, and the living revelation that the Creator of the cosmos loves all of creation, including each one of us, unrelentingly, and has put us here to bask in, embody, and share that love abundantly.

He befriended sinners and outcasts. He subverted the brutality of empires. He was called a king by some, but lived as a refugee and a transient.

He critiqued religious and state powers and mob mentalities, and was executed at the hands of them all, while loving them all to the very end.

He was raised from the dead by God, both proving and enacting the salvation and restoration that God wills for all creation. Including you and me.

The cross is the centermost point of it all, the crux of death and of life, of giving and receiving, of physics and metaphysics, of the profane and the sacred, of humanity and divinity.

We don't prove it mathematically. But we live out our lives there, at the foot of the cross at the center of the universe.

During the earliest years of the church, a piece of writing was circulated among some of those first congregations. It has come to be called Ephesians, or the Letter to the Church in Ephesus. And Ephesians said,

“Be careful then how you live,” or literally, “how you walk”—be careful how you go on your way—

“Not as unwise people but as wise,
making the most of”—or, literally, “*redeeming* the time,
because the days are evil.”

“Because the days are evil” doesn’t mean all our days are Satanic. Every day of your life is a gift from God; it’s not some inherently sinful blight or curse.

The way the Greek reads to me, it seems like it’s more kind of a disposition toward the world. In other words, it’s saying, “as opposed to a guaranteed buffet of all you can eat rainbows and sunshine, the day itself couldn’t actually care less about who you are. The day isn’t here to be good to you—if anything, you can expect most days to bring some trouble of one kind or another, particularly if you are not mindful.”

“So don’t be foolish,” says Ephesians, “but understand what God’s will is. Allow yourself to be filled with God’s Spirit, [and] give thanks to God at all times and for everything.”

It’s called Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, but there’s no compelling evidence that it was Paul’s, a letter, or had anything to do specifically with the Ephesians.ⁱⁱ

It’s actually more of a general testimony for *all* people of The Way, who were trying to live faithful lives in a disorienting time, when everything seemed subject to drastic change such as had not been felt in generations—but nobody could be entirely sure what was coming, or what exactly was going to be left behind once the dust settled;

a time when good, thoughtful people couldn’t even agree on basic, fundamental, observable truth,

and everybody seemed to be way more interested in winning some existential argument on points than on solving problems for everyone’s benefit—let alone on doing what was right in God’s eyes.

I don’t know if you can relate to a time like that, but just imagine.

The other day I saw a thing that's been going around the internet that said, "Someone asked me if I had plans for the fall, and it took me a moment to realize they meant 'Autumn' and not the collapse of civilization."

Strange times. Be careful, then, how you live—how you walk, how you go—and make the most of the time. Because not every day will automatically bring happiness and sunshine.

So it's a good thing we don't have to do this alone.

There was a movie that came out a few years ago called *Open Water*, a fictional account of a couple who on vacation went out on a dive boat, which is a tourism thing for experienced scuba divers—these boats take a group of people well out to sea for some deep-sea diving, and after a specified amount of time, everybody comes back up and gets on the boat, they do a head count and the boat takes everybody back to shore.

But due to a miscount and a late return to the surface, one couple finds themselves stranded in the middle of the ocean with only the gear they're wearing and no sign of the boat.

It's not really a feel-good summer movie.

But the reason it comes to mind is not the plot; it's something that happened during the filming.ⁱⁱⁱ

I didn't mention it before, but this was a very small, independent film, written, directed and produced by one couple and starring two virtually unknown actors, and they didn't use a movie set; they went out onto the water. So it was usually just a small boat out on the ocean for the husband-and-wife filming crew, and the two actors who spent most of the movie in the water.

One day, one of the four spotted something on the far, dim horizon, light grey against a lighter grey sky: the faint, ghostly image of an astronomically distant large vessel, a freighter or a cruise ship.

When you're on a shoestring budget, you take every free prop you can get, so they quickly improvised a scene just to heighten the tension a little bit: the couple in the water would see that dim outline on the impossibly far horizon and start waving their arms wildly, in the infinitesimal and obviously futile hope that they would be seen and rescued. And the ship would move on across the horizon and they'd go back to filming the original script.

So they filmed that extra scene, the camera straining to see the tiny grey shadow on the horizon, and then went on with whatever other scenes they were filming that day.

A few minutes later, one of the production crew saw something unbelievable. That massive, impossibly distant ship was turning toward the spot where the actors had waved their arms.

After some frantic radioing, the production team was able to communicate to the giant ship that this was just a movie.

First of all, if you're a ship that enormous, whether you're an ocean liner or a freighter, the idea that you would see a tiny, distant speck—that you're not specifically looking for—on the ocean, from miles and miles and miles away, seems incredible. I didn't know that could happen, and apparently that misconception seemed equally obvious to the film crew, all of whom were experienced deep-sea divers.

Second, think of the physical energy and commitment, the power that is required to turn that vessel on the high seas, then imagine the decision being made to do it without even knowing for sure if it's necessary.

Third, the economics of it—you've got to deliver thousands of people,

or millions of dollars' worth of inventory, on a strict timeline, and if that timeline isn't met, there are enormous consequences.

That giant ship had turned its massive hull and begun to lumber across the surface just for the possibility of coming to the rescue of the smallest and most helpless.

When you are lost at sea, with endless horizon around you,
and no protection from the elements,
and an incomprehensible depth beneath you,
and predators circling,
and days and nights that couldn't care less,
and there is no foothold,

and the only hope you can see,
with less probability of succeeding than the wish
that a child makes blowing dandelion seeds,
is the faintest, most distant, ghostly, shadow,

your simple distress signal—your faintest, most pathetic, ineloquent,
desperate prayer—reaches across the endless waves and the bottomless
depths, and crackles to life, and is received loud and clear on the other
side.

*The LORD is gracious and merciful.
He provides for those who fear him;
He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.
Holy and awesome is his name.*

“Take heed then for how you go,
not as the unwise, but as the wise,
redeeming the time,
because each day brings bad news for somebody.
So don't be foolish,

but understand what the will of God is.”

God opened the door wide for Solomon to ask for whatever somebody might wish for from the genie in the bottle: long life, or titanic wealth, or for his enemies to get permanently put out of business.

And with all of that on the table, Solomon said instead, “Just help me figure out, and do, what’s right.”

And God said, “Buddy, you just gave the right answer.”

What are the beliefs that are at the foundations of who you are—beliefs about God, or you, or why anything exists at all?

And what do those beliefs tell you about how God is inviting you to live this one life well?

And how much difference does it make to you that you don’t have to try to do this alone?

*I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.*

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
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ⁱ Bryson, Bill. *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (Crown/Archetype), 17.

ⁱⁱ Among many general references, see J. Paul Sampley, “Ephesians—Occasion and Purpose” in Wayne Meeks, ed., *HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 2192.

ⁱⁱⁱ This anecdote was told by the filmmaker in the DVD released in the mid-2000s. It may have been heard in the director’s commentary track.