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**SERMON TITLE: The Church's Testimony—and Yours!**

**SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 3:1-13**

**DATE: February 10, 2019**

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*Do* you remember when you became a believer in Jesus Christ? Do you remember when you “saw the light?”

For Abraham it was when God spoke to him in a vision:

“Then the LORD took Abram outside and said to him, “Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!” And Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith” (Genesis 15:5-6).

Later, God spoke personally to Abraham's son Isaac, when Isaac had problems with surrounding tribes and God reiterated the blessing:

“I am the God of your father Abraham; do not be afraid, for I am with you and will bless you and make your offspring numerous for my servant Abraham's sake.” So Isaac built an altar there, called on the name of the LORD, and pitched his tent there” (Genesis 26:24-25a).

The same personal encounter happened for Jacob too while he was running away from his brother Esau. He dreamed of a ladder to heaven:

“I am the LORD, the God of Abraham . . . and Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring, who will be like the dust of the earth . . . and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you . . . for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

Then Jacob awoke and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place-- and I did not know it!” (Genesis 28:12-16)

Jacob marked the place with a stone and made a vow to accept God and serve God by giving him one tenth of everything. (see Genesis 28:17-22)

Faith in God is a personal encounter. When was your personal encounter? We are not grandfathered into the Christian faith. How has your personal faith changed your life? It is out of personal faith that your Christian life grows.

All these men were raised in the faith, but there came a time for their own personal decision to believe. Their actions were changed because of that faith decision.

Paul had the same kind of personal encounter with Jesus. Although he grew up as a law-abiding Jew, he had no heart for

Jesus or for Christians. Why was his religion not enough? Because you cannot know the love of God until you know God personally through Jesus.

Paul met Jesus on the Damascus Road and it changed his whole life. Read Paul's testimony in Ephesians 3:1-9.

Now remember what's in the promise to Abraham's family: *all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring*. But that only happens through faith. Faith changes each person's focus and actions:

- ~ *Abraham believed God, left his country and followed;*
- ~ *Isaac built an altar, pitched his tent and lived by faith as a sojourner;*
- ~ *Jacob set up an altar, pledged himself to God and gave 10 percent of everything.*
- ~ *Paul pledged to take Christ's message to the Gentiles, even at the cost of prison.*

Sometimes we feel that we are not good enough, or it is too hard to change or we are too busy, or we want to do our own thing so please God, bother someone else!

Paul had a checkered past himself. He probably felt the same way, when he was sitting blind in Damascus before Ananias showed up. (see Acts 9) Because he had been so zealous for his Jewish religion that he sought out Christians to arrest and even have them killed, he probably thought—there's no hope for me! I am not good enough! That's why he called himself the least deserving.

Yet Jesus did have hope for him, just like God had hope for Jacob, who had stolen his brother's birthright, and like he has hope for you and me. So that hope gives us the courage to obey God by faith; honor God; and focus on him with joy. Out of their faith and ours, the church is born.

The church's testimony comes through *your very personal response to God*.

You are God's church. You are part of the family that is to bless all nations. You exist because Paul responded with his whole life to Jesus Christ. He had the hope to live a different way. Because he did, you have the chance to be a believer, and you have an example for how to move forward and build the church that blesses and brings hope and the knowledge of our Creator to the world.

Each person struggles with something, but with Jesus in your life, with a daily personal relationship, you have hope to overcome and have a new, transformed life, even when life is tough. You are not alone in this—you have all these believers in the church together, in their rich variety. It is not just a “religion” but a vibrant, living nation; a massive group of people who point to God.

God’s Spirit resides within you, so the church or the “sanctuary” of God is mobile, so to speak. Wherever you go, you bear the Good News of Jesus Christ. That’s why we say, “*You go nowhere by accident. Wherever you go God is sending you. Wherever you are God has put you there. He has a purpose in your being there and he has given you his Holy Spirit.*”

Do you think about that in the morning when you go out? Do you think about that at work? Do you reach out to others to bless them even when you are shopping?

How has your faith in Christ changed your focus and actions? Paul writes:

“God’s purpose in all this was to use the church to display his wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was his eternal plan, which he carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord” (Ephesians 3:10-11).

I doubt that you see yourself as being a witness not only to the world, but also to the unseen powers of heaven! These are spiritual beings, angels. What might we teach these rulers and authorities?

Perhaps you have had an encounter with an angel. Heavenly beings are sent to help us. I heard an Air Force pilot say he does not question the fact that when you might have flown one way but instead you flew another way and it turned out to save your life, you know “somebody else put you there.”

Angels and divine beings are around us. Have you ever thought *what might they learn from me?*

They know all about God as Creator. They were close to God in the garden. They know God’s power and wisdom. So what can we teach heavenly beings? What was not known in the beginning that we display for them? The love of the Cross.

We have received the incredible love of Jesus in the cross. It is love that brings us together in all our rich diversity. It is love that helps us overcome alienation, sin, and separation. When we reach out as the church our special mark is love for one another that crosses the barriers of racial or national divide.

What is the strategy of Satan? It is to divide the church. Pride keeps the church apart. As male and female, black, white, and brown, as different denominations, we have agendas over which we separate. **These hurt the church.**

Satan uses these agendas against us. But when we really grasp the love of God, we put loving God and serving Him as our top priority, rather than my own agenda:

Abraham grasped it;  
Isaac embraced it;  
Jacob found hope in it;  
Paul gained a new beginning through it.

Then we bring the whole cosmos together through God’s plan and will. This is possible because God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are work in, with, and through us.

Paul explains this marvelous benefit: “Because of Christ and our faith in him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God’s presence. So please don’t lose heart because of my trials here. I am suffering for you, so you should feel honored” (v. 12-13).

Do you know what “boldly and confidently” mean? It means you have freedom of speech with God. Theologian Andrew Lincoln says you have “the democratic right” to say everything you wish to say to God. You can come to God without shame, with nothing to conceal because God is graciously disposed toward you through Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

Paul did not say “because of my past I will never be anything.” He said instead, “I can do all things in Christ.”

Paul did not say “because I am in prison there’s no hope and my work won’t go on.” He said “let’s not lose heart because of trials. . . . Feel honored instead.”

What hardship or trial or prejudice or hurt do you need to set aside so you can fully embrace the love of Jesus? It is your testimony; do you want to live in it? Or remain in your own agenda?

People need the Lord. Our love, shown in our diversity is the church’s testimony. Satan will continue to divide our nation. But if we as the church come together and display the love of Jesus, God can do great things. If we embrace our witness and love Jesus as our first priority, through us, God will change the world.

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Lincoln, *Word Biblical Commentary, Ephesians*, p. 190.