

Lent 4 Year B 2021
March 14, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

What will the future hold? After a year living in this pandemic, we've all dealt with some level of uncertainty. Today, we experience that a little more acutely as we've had to suspend in-person worship for this week. But even still, we have this idea and hope that the pandemic will eventually be over, and the future will come, and things will be mostly okay—at least in terms of the pandemic. But this question can be fairly troubling in our world today, depending on what we're talking about. What is the future of humanity on the earth? Will climate change make the planet uninhabitable? Will a world war or a sequence of bombs destroy humanity? Or on a smaller scale, how will the political climate change? Will we be financially secure in retirement? How can we prepare our children or grandchildren for the future? The future can be a scary thought for some people and situations, and at the very least, the future brings with it a great deal of uncertainty.

While we've done our best to become comfortable living with uncertainty in this past year, generally, we like to know what's coming. We have this desire to predict and control the future. If we can predict it, we feel we can be prepared. But in many cases, the future is a mystery. And mysteries, trouble us, confound us, and need to be solved. There was a time in human history when we were *more* content with mysteries. But with an ever-growing depth of scientific knowledge and continually advancing technology, mysteries have become easier to investigate and solve.

We can look to the Weather Channel or the app on our phones to find out what we can expect the weather to do in the next hour, next day, or the next 10 days. The Farmer's Almanac has already provided some predictions that Easter Sunday this year is supposed to be a rainy one for our region. We don't quote the verse from a little earlier in John's gospel anymore: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes." There's no more mystery. We don't even have to look out the window anymore. We just look to our apps, and the mysteries of the weather are solved!

There was also a time when the birth of a child brought with it a shout of surprise as we learned the gender of our new baby. But with ultrasounds and medical technology, we have access to this information long before a child is born. In fact, when I was pregnant with Ella, I had family members and friends who were upset with us that we didn't find out the gender through an ultrasound, because then they didn't know what color gifts to buy. And today, there's a whole industry around gender reveal parties before a child is born. No longer are we simply formed in secret in our mothers' wombs. Now we know. Mystery solved!

There was a time when the phone rang and we would ask, "Who is it?" but now the caller ID tells us, so we can decide if we want to answer or not. Mystery solved!

Solving mysteries and making predictions and preparing for the future is just part of what we do as humans. But what happens when there's a mystery that we cannot solve? Or when the future is uncertain? Quite often we end up tossing and turning, biting our nails, and waiting nervously to see how things will turn out. And these are times when we are most likely to turn to prayer. I'm pretty sure I've done all of these things in the past year, and in the past 24 hours, as we've dealt with uncertainty.

We prefer to be able to control the future as much as possible, and we live as though we have that control. We make appointments, we save for retirement, and we make all kinds of plans as if the future truly is certain and controlled. But through this pandemic, we've now seen the unpredictable nature of the future. And we've seen how a pandemic can change our plans. The unpredictable nature of the future also means that unfavorable weather might delay a trip, or the stock market might crash and delay our retirement plans. The frustrating reality of life is that we

don't have control over the future, and so the future will always be a mystery with the potential to instill in us fear and uncertainty.

Unless we are with Christ. Then, our future is not so mysterious. God has revealed our future to us. In the letter to the Ephesians, the writer pulls us into the future, first reminding us of our sinfulness and brokenness. But then he tells that that because we cannot redeem ourselves, "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, ... raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly place in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith." God has redeemed us, and because of God's grace, God promises that our future will be with God in the heavenly kingdom.

The wonder of this passage is that the writer allows us to see the future, and it is a future that is certain and promised. It is no longer a mystery. Although this future doesn't tell us about our retirement funds, and it doesn't promise a future without suffering, this future encompasses much more. The writer of Ephesians also tells us just before today's passage 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.*"

This is God's promise to us. This is God's plan for us. God promises us the amazing gift of a future that is certain. God's amazing grace gathers up our sins, our failures, our pains, our brokenness, and our illusions, and exchanges them for the death and resurrection of Christ. Instead of holding us accountable for all the ways that we fail to keep the Commandments and live in God's image, God promises to gather all things up in God's self, and provide us with forgiveness, love, and resurrection.

We hear again of this promised future in our gospel reading today, in that favorite verse that has been quoted over and over again. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life." Martin Luther calls it, "the gospel in miniature," indicating that it is the very heart of our faith. The very heart of our faith is that God loves us and the whole world unconditionally.

God's love for us will sustain us in times of uncertainty. God loves us too much to cause us to fear an unknown eternal future. And God loves us too much to inflict eternal punishment on us. This is the good news for us, for all of Christianity, and for the whole world: God loves us unconditionally, and God promises us the gift of eternal life.

God "loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses," and God "made us alive together with Christ." God loves us even in our sinfulness, God loves us enough to wash away our sins, and God loves us enough to promise us a life together eternally in Christ.

This love is more powerful than sin, more powerful than uncertainty and doubt, and more powerful than death. This love bears with it the promise of a future, a future that is certain, and a future that is filled with hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.