

SERMON: Ephesians 1:15-23

HOPE...RICHES...POWER

“Did you hear?”

With those three little words, we often get the whispered introductions to rumor or gossip or scandal. *Did you hear? So-and-so did this-or-that and started a whatcha-ma-callit and a whoozee-whatzit!* I doubt that I need to point out to you the problems with these vague, uncertain, and whispered words. “Did you hear?” can be a very dangerous phrase.

But it can also be a very beautiful phrase. And that’s actually the way the Apostle Paul brings it up in these verses. Because it turns out that Paul had heard that phrase from a number of different people, and it was all about this congregation in Ephesus, these believers that he had come to know and love so well. *Did you hear?* people asked. *Did you hear about their faith, and the way they show love to others?* It’s beautiful!

And so, in light of this beautiful phrase, we might expect Paul to launch into a congratulatory song of praise for the Ephesians. After all, he had spent three years there among them, starting a church, teaching them about their faith, building them up and equipping them for ministry in a very difficult setting. We might expect Paul to give them the verbal equivalent of a congregational pat on the back. “Way to go, guys! You did it! You got it all figured out!”

But that’s not what he does.

And that’s not what we’re going to do for you today, either. Abbey, Brock, Braden—this day isn’t about giving you some sort of completion certificate that praises you and compliments you for all your hard work. In fact, the main celebration today is the Ascension of Our Lord, when we marvel at the strength and comfort Jesus’ saving work brings to God’s people. Your confirmation—while exciting—is really just an extension of all the glorious work your God has already done for you!

And that’s where Paul begins in these verses.

¹⁵ For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶ I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I keep on asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

Paul gives thanks *for* them, not *to* them. This isn’t a moment of personal applause. And then he prays that the same thing keeps happening that has been happening all along: that God does his work. This isn’t the pinnacle of Christian living, this is the continuation of Christian growth.

So, confirmands. And let’s also add the two other people who will be standing here today, confessing their faith, and joining this congregation. Let’s start right here: this day is all about the work of God’s eternal gospel. Your stories are wonderful—and maybe we’ll even have some time to talk about them today. But God’s story is greater—and that’s what today is all about.

It’s the story of something you can’t necessarily see or feel. Because it’s never been based on what you see or feel. Go back to the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve hung their heads in shame after their humiliating fall into sin. All they saw was their failure, the way their sin changed everything from their marriage to their clothing. All they felt was their shame, that vicious prison of guilt over what they had done.

And then the gospel did its work. It made a promise—a promise that a serpent-crusher would come and remove their sin and shame. It made a promise that this unseen “Word” would work in their

hearts and give them the conviction that forgiveness is guaranteed and heaven is their home and everything would be okay.

The story continued with that Word, that promise becoming flesh, becoming tangible, becoming something that was absolutely seen and felt. It was there in a manger in Bethlehem. It was there in a young boy sitting on a temple floor. It was there, leaned upon a stone where whips would tear his back, and there, where his blood would stain a cross. And it was there, too, even when it was seen and felt no longer—when the tomb was empty and when a cloud hid an ascending figure.

And this is now your story. This is the story that God has settled into your hearts and minds and given you the assurance of forgiveness and life forever in heaven. This is the gospel: the story of your Savior, Jesus, who came for you! And so, like Paul does with these Ephesian Christians, we do with you. We thank God for the work he has already done in you. We give thanks for you. And we pray that he continues to help you know your Savior better.

I'm sure you know that you will receive some gifts today. And I'd imagine that you're excited to open them and see what you get. And in a way, that's similar to the excitement and enthusiasm your God has, having given you this glorious gift of faith. Your confirmation is an opportunity to unwrap this gift and see all the blessings it brings into your life.

¹⁸ I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

On this confirmation day, on this Ascension day, on this day when we thank God for you and the faith he has given you, we also pray that you come to know the amazing blessings this story of the gospel gives you.

It gives you HOPE. We've talked about this before. Hope is not a squishy sort of wish for the future. God's hope is different. This hope that he gives is the concrete reality of death's destruction. This is the very real promise of heaven. Death is not your final stop. Death is not like the life faucet simply being turned to the "off" position. For you—because Christ himself died and rose again—death is the start of your eternal life in heaven.

And you need this hope. You need this reminder of the life that awaits you...because the life you have now isn't always that great. You will be sucked into the sorrow and loss of this world. You will experience heartache and disappointment. You will lose loved ones. And because you are young, you will likely have much more of it to come. And when that happens, our prayer for you and your God's gift to you is HOPE. This world is just a temporary home. You have something better awaiting you in heaven, with your Savior.

This story also gives you RICHES. You might be at the age when riches seem like a pretty important thing. Our world certainly stresses it. They say that if you start investing \$50 right now, every month, by the time you are 60 you could be a millionaire! Talk about riches, right?!

Actually, no. Your God doesn't think or work so small as to limit himself to a bank account. Instead, he pours out his riches through his people, through his church. Right here, in this church, in this congregation, you are overflowing with abundance in people who pray for you, who support you, who embrace you and encourage you. Right here, you have a family of forgiven sinners (saints) that gathers around the Word with you, and that cares enough for you to make sure your soul is fed. Right here, you are rich with the forgiveness of Holy Communion and the grace of Holy Baptism. Those are your riches.

And you need them. Because the riches our world offers—money, clothing, shoes, self-indulgence, pleasure—they all snap and fray and fail under the strain. They don't take away the root

causes of your struggles. And so, when you are suffering and when you are alone, God gives you the riches of his grace right here, in a family that walks with you and a church that feeds you with the Word.

This gospel story also gives you POWER. And maybe we don't talk about that enough. But your Triune God is at work within you. That's no small thing. The same power that the Father used to call this world into existence...the same power that raised Christ himself from the dead...the same power that the Holy Spirit used to create believers throughout all time...is in your heart.

And you need this power now. And you will need it every day of your life. You will need it when you're just not feeling the whole church thing on a Sunday morning. You will need it when temptations come racing into your life and roaring into your mind. You will need it when you fail, which you will do. You will need it when shame over repeated sins pulls your face down and you feel like you can't see anything else but what you've done wrong. And the power of your Triune God will lift you up, will strengthen you to be here, will fight the battle against temptation for you, and will open your eyes to see that same blood-stained cross where you know your forgiveness and your life are never in doubt!

And it will speak those same three words into your heart that we began with this morning: "Did you hear? Did you hear what your Savior has done for you? Did you hear how he has promised to be with you and strengthen you through his Word? Did you hear about his top-down blessings: hope in heaven, riches here in your family, and power in your heart?"

Abbey, Brock, and Braden: today you stand here and say, "Yes, we have heard." Your confirmation is really just a recognition of God's consistent and repeated grace for you. It's not based on your effort or intelligence or aptitude. It is God's Word, working through the beautiful story of his gospel. Rejoice in it. Rest in it. And cling to it, all the days of your life.

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy - to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forever more! Amen.