**Ephesians 3**

Matt Royston

Skagway Presbyterian Church (11 am)

**Title**: Filling the Temple

**Other Scripture:**

Father God, open our eyes…

Jesus open our ears…

Holy Spirit, Open our hearts…

Well down in Juneau, at the church facility of Chapel by the Lake where I’m a pastor, there are two trees in the back yard of the church facility. The congregation planted them several years ago, and they are called the Pentecost trees. The reason they are called that is because in the fall, the leaves on these trees usually turn bright red. When that happens each fall, it is spectacularly beautiful.

Red of course is the color of Pentecost…the day recorded in the book of Acts when the Holy Spirit came down out of the heavens and landed on a new community of people who were seeking to follow Jesus. Luke, in the book of Acts records that shortly before Peter gave his powerful speech to a crowd gathered in Jerusalem, something like flames of fire came down and landed on the people. They began speaking in languages not their own…and in the midst of this seemingly chaotic, but very spirit-filled moment…God created the first Christian church…a group of individuals united through the holy spirit to be one.

Well this week, the leaves on that tree have turned from red to yellow. Bright yellow. Vibrant color in the midst of a gray and cloudy, landscape. Elaborate beauty in the midst of the mundane and ordinary.

Last week, we read… that in the church, God is shows the magnificence of His beauty in the ordinariness of this everyday world. In the church, God is building a new temple…a new dwelling place to dwell.

When the original temple was built…as recorded in 1st Kings, when it was completed, there was this amazing moment where the Glory of the Lord literally filled the temple. This passage from 1st Kings ignites our imaginations…this cloud…which was the spirit of the Lord… rushes into the temple…the presence of God entering into this newly constructed dwelling place.

But eventually, that Temple was destroyed…and eventually the second temple along with it.

But now Paul is saying that the new temple…would not be a physical building. Instead…the Lord will dwell in the hearts of the community of Jesus followers.

And today…we …you here at Skagway Presbyterian Church…are that new temple.

Now the word Paul uses to talk about this strange reality…is the word **mystery**. And he is going to tell us a lot more about this mystery in today’s chapter.

**Let’s read together Ephesians Chapter 3.**

You know, if Paul ever took a writing class, he most certainly would have gotten high scores for his ideas. His Theology is second to none. His ways of putting together concepts and ideas is brilliant…and has indeed shaped much of history.

On the other hand, I think Paul would have gotten low scores for his grammar and his organization! Paul was desperately in need of an editor! Even though our English translations do some work of cleaning it up…Paul is the King of the Run-on-Sentence.

And here…in Chapter 3…did you notice…Paul gets completely sidetracked??

Right in the middle of his first sentence, he stops…totally changes where he is going. Instead of completing his thought, he introduces 12 verses of a sidetrack diatribe.

In my TNIV…the first sentence literally stops. Again…our translators help us by breaking up the sentence and putting a dash…but if you were reading this from scratch, I’m sure you would have gotten through the second stanza and wondered if you had misread something.

Now it’s not structurally sound, but in that 12 verse diatribe, Paul pulls back the curtain just a bit on his own life and his own situation.

Paul is not writing in a vacuum…he is writing out of a real context…a real situation. Several years ago, one of my favorite Christian Theologians wrote that any Theological thought worth holding…must hold up both to the lofty thinking of the academy…as well as the nitty gritty, day to day, sometimes mundane…real life. Theology has to make sense in the grand moments…but it also has to make sense while washing dishes and changing diapers.

Paul is not sitting in some world-class library, wearing a tweed overcoat, drinking spiced lattes and warming himself by the fire…no…Paul is in prison.

Paul is surrounded by hunger, desperation, uncertainty…and looming death. Paul does not know how many days he has remaining. He is very truly in a place of suffering. Paul takes this suffering very seriously. And while his suffering doesn’t define him, it certainly creates a platform by which we can evaluate the authenticity of what he says.

C.S. Lewis is one of the most helpful thinkers of the recent modern era when it comes to understanding where God is in the midst of real-life suffering. He has two books devoted to this topic. And if you are to evaluate the content…the theology of which Lewis speaks, you’d find that the two books are roughly the same. Lewis’ claim that suffering is actually an opportunity in which God becomes more known…not less. That through suffering, God is able to display God’s love and grace and redemption…God’s true character.

Both books claim the same thing. However, the settings are totally different. The first book is called the Problem of Pain. He wrote this early in his life and academic career. He was developing a career as an apologist and relied on logical thinking and reason in addressing God’s presence in the midst of evil and suffering. It is a powerful…but a very academic…discussion of the issue.

The second book is called A Grief Observed. It was written 20 years later in his life. In fact, it was published only after he had passed away. In this book, Lewis reflects on his own personal, emotional wrestling with pain after his wife Joy, died of cancer shortly after they were married…married later in life.

It is not at all academic. It is raw. It is filled with hurt. It contains half-written senctences. Ocasionally he presents the beginning of a thought, only to abandon the thought and pick up on something else. In the end, the theology is the same…but it takes on a whole different meaning because of the context out of which it was written.

A friend of mine says that Lewis’ second book has the same thoughts of his first, but it is written in a minor key.

Contrary to what many believe…and contrary to the way we often live…the Christian faith does not ignore the reality of pain and hardship in life.

The Bible does not shy away from suffering and from pain. In fact, the Biblical Narrative points to God’s plan to overcome pain and suffering. God’s plan is to redeem and reconcile…to bring about joy and wholeness and peace. This is what Paul is writing about. And he knows that of which he speaks. After all, he is in prison…as we’ve mentioned.

And in last week’s passage, as well as in today’s, God’s reconciliation plan… is to be accomplished through the Church.

Now Paul speaks of mystery…the mystery of the Gospel. The mystery is that God is reconciling Jews and Gentiles…bringing them together into the same family…for the sake of bearing the promise of Christ to the world.

The way the bible uses the word mystery is not the way we use it if we think of a mystery novel or a mystery movie. In a mystery novel, there is a puzzle to solve. And you read the book or watch the movie…and you put the pieces of the puzzle together attempting to solve the mystery. And if you’re good at it, you can guess who the theif was. My wife is much better at guessing the theif than I am.

The Gospel is not like that…it is not a puzzle to solve. The Gospel is more like a wonder…something that is held together, but the way it is held together is surprising. Every time “mystery” is used by Paul…it is about a theological truth that you would never have guessed.

You never would guess that Abraham…in his elder years…with his barren wife…would become the Father of Israel.

You never would guess that little David…the youngest of the brothers…the one who was almost discarded…would be the one to unite the Kingdom of Israel and propel it into its glory years.

And you would never guess…that the Messiah of Israel…the conquering king who would heal the nations…would be an obscure carpenter, born scandalously to a peasant teenager.

And now…Paul is saying that the world will know of God’s ultimate power and glory and honor and majesty through the church.

And this church is not going to be…a gathering of righteous Jews…but instead a coming together of Jews and Gentile believers. You never would have guessed it.

And that rag-tag group of followers would be empowered by the Holy Spirit to go into the world and preach the Gospel to every nation and every people.

In light of that mystery…the power of that mystery…Paul is driven to his knees in a posture of worship. Before the Father…that family word again…before the Father, Paul prays for this church. Paul realizes the enormous nature of the church’s task. This group of ragtag Ephesians has the task of being the witness of the most important reality the world has ever known.

And Paul knows they can’t do it on their own power.

So what does Paul pray for?

He prays for power and strength. There is a big job ahead, and it will require everything the people have…and in fact it will require more than the people have. So Paul prays for strength and power.

Now the funny thing about the words “strength and power”…when you think of those words, if you’re anything like me, you may think of something awful. Do you? Maybe its cynicism that has taken over my mind…but when I think of strength and power, I think of how often those with it…lord it over those without.

So often…The powerful of the world use their power for their own good and at the expense of the weak and marginalized. Today, there is much talk about the growing distance between the “haves” and the “have nots.” Or of the nationswith strength bullying lesser nations into submission for the sake of exploitation.

But that type of strength and power is rooted in self-centeredness…or perhaps fear.

But the strength that God gives God’s church…through the Holy Spirit…is a strength rooted and established in love.

When Paul talks about love here…he is talking about self-giving love…This is not the “I love the Seattle Seahawks kind of love.” That kind of love is an admiration love…love from a distance…love without real commitment.

Paul is speaking of “agape” love. The kind of love that in order to give, something is required. In order to agape-love someone, a piece of yourself is required.

Self-emptying love…love that is poured out. And the ultimate example of this, of course, is Jesus on the cross. In order for God to so “love” the world…he had to give his son. His love was so full, that it required the ultimate emptying. “How wide and long and high and deep is the love of God!”

Love that full, is frankly, impossible for us to give on our own power.

And so Paul prays that we would be filled to the measure with the fullness of God. Paul prays that the Spirit of God would fill us…as it filled the Temple of Solomon…as filled the first believers at Pentecost…fill us with the love of God.

And if that is true…as Paul believes it to be true…if that is true, then it means we have some dreaming to do. Because the power that is available to us is more than we realize…more than we can understand or comprehend…or even imagine. God’s power is at work with you…Skagway Presbyterian Church.

Now it’s possible that you might look around this sanctuary…you might look around and see some pretty ordinary folks. And you might look at yourself in the mirror and see a pretty common-looking character. And as you look around you may think to yourself…how could this be God’s Plan? Really? This group of folks?

It is a mystery.

And yet…the power of God…the power that surpasses knowledge…is available to you! Not for your own benefit…but available to you…to be poured out in love to this community that God has created you to serve.

Friends, The good news of Jesus Christ has come to Skagway Alaska…and God has chosen you to bear that news. And not only that…God, through the Holy Spirit, has given you everything you need to complete this work. Amen.