

And Now the End Is Near

The Focus of Our Faith

Frankton – 6/5/16

Scripture: Acts 20.18-24, 32 Paul saying Good-bye to Ephesus leaders

Proposition: The focus of our faith is Christ, not the pastor.

We're coming down to the last couple of sermons that I get to deliver as your pastor. I hope they are good ones. I'd hate to leave on some stinker sermons. Not that I've never preached stinker sermons here before. I know I have. Some of you have been kind and never told me that you thought one was a stinker. Others of you have made sure I knew that you thought a particular sermon was a stinker. That's ok. One person's stinker sermon is another person's eye-opening sermon. That's just how it works. But I hope these last couple aren't stinkers. So let's get started.

Let's set this scripture passage up just a little bit. During Paul's third missionary journey, he was doing what he did on his first two journeys: sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with anyone who would listen and then starting new Christian churches with those who came to believe Jesus was the Messiah. On this third journey, one of the cities Paul stopped at was Ephesus. Ephesus was a rich port city, full of trade and travelers. It was also the home to the [SLIDE] Temple of Artemis; a goddess of fertility. In fact, the Temple of Artemis was the major economic factor in the city. Much of the trade in Ephesus was due to the Temple of Artemis being there. People would come on pilgrimages to the Temple and would want to take back trinkets and souvenirs of their trip to Artemis' Temple. (Much like Jan and I brought back trinkets and souvenirs from Israel.) Paul stayed in Ephesus for three years, converting many of the Ephesians and founding and leading the Christian church there.

Unfortunately, some people thought Paul overstayed his welcome. The local tradesmen – the ones making the trinkets and souvenirs for the pilgrims to the Temple – were not happy that Paul was telling folks that Artemis wasn't a real goddess and that this Jesus fellow was raised by the real God. These craftsmen complained to the local authorities that if Paul was allowed to continue to spread such "lies" that it would hurt their business because people would think less of Artemis, which in turn would hurt the local economy of Ephesus. The craftsmen gathered an angry mob and, as you might well expect, Paul was run out of town. And he went to Thessalonica and stayed there for several months.

When he left Thessalonica, he headed back to Jerusalem. He wanted to stop in at the church in Ephesus and talk over things with the leaders there – to see how things were going, to help with any problems there, to set straight any wrong theology that might have crept in since he left, and to tell them good-bye because he was probably never going to see them again. You see, his plan was to go to Jerusalem, then to Rome and Spain to continue to spread the good news of Jesus. So that's why he wanted to say good bye; he didn't think he would ever be back in Ephesus. But then he remembered how he left Ephesus the last time - just ahead of the mob – and he decided that he would send for the leaders of the Ephesian church and have them meet him at Miletus, a port village about 30 miles south of Ephesus. There he could talk with the leaders and not have to face any of the Ephesian mob. So that's the story of the setting of this scripture: Paul is talking and saying good-bye to the leaders of the Ephesian church down in the village of Miletus.

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You might ask why Paul would want to go to Rome and Spain to continue spreading the gospel of Jesus. After all, he's got a thriving ministry in the area he is at. He's started many, many churches; surely they would need him. Surely he would want to be with them just in case they got into some theological conundrum or some civil unrest or – heaven forbid – some division within the church folks. Why would he want to up and leave? That's what you might be asking. I think there's a verse that give Paul's reply to that question. It's verse 24: [SLIDE] *But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus* [SLIDE] — *the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.*

Notice Paul's words: his life is worth nothing...unless he is doing the work Christ told him to do – share God's grace with others. All the work he has already done isn't enough. He has more work to do. There are still people who haven't heard Paul speak of God's grace through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And if Paul doesn't continue in his work – his life is nothing. That's quite a statement.

Guess what. We should be able to make the same statement. God has given us all work to do – the same work as Paul. We are to share the story of God's grace through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Psalm 19 reminds us that all creation shows God's glory – and we are a part of that creation. Jesus was much more specific in Matthew when he said: “go, make disciples, baptize them, and teach them everything I have taught you.” And in Acts he said: “you are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth.” We may not fulfill our work like Paul did. He was called to leave his home share God's story and start new churches. I don't think he has called very many of us in this room to do that, but certainly we are to share our story as it fits in with Christ's story with those who think like we think, who work where we work, and who live where we live.

I think it's important today to understand that as Paul is saying good-bye to these folks, probably for the last time, he reminds them what is really important: to finish the assignment given to him even though they would be parted by many miles. Paul's emphasis isn't in the good-bye, but rather in what had to happen after the good-bye.

I agree with Paul. We are approaching our final good-bye. I still have one more sermon next week and we'll have some 'bon voyage' activities next Sunday afternoon. So this isn't our last good-bye. However, we are winding down our time together. So, the sentiment is the same. As Jan and I leave this place, our prayer is that you continue to do the work that God has for you, just as we are going to do the work God has for us. It is our prayer that we continue to hear great things about the Frankton First United Methodist Church. About how you are still sharing God's love with everyone you meet outside the doors of this church. What I don't want to have happen is that our departure signals a time when you can depart from the mission of this church: to Build God's Community. I don't think you will, so I'm not too concerned about that.

But I do want to bring up something that other people have lifted up to me as their concern. Some people are worried that when Jan and I walk through that door for the last time, there will be people in the congregation who do the same thing. They are afraid that when Jan and I leave, others will leave too. I for one hope not. Let me just say up front – and forcefully – just because Jan and I are leaving, that's no reason for anyone else to leave. Our departure isn't an excuse for your departure. There are too many reasons for you to stay put and stay the course. First of all, staying

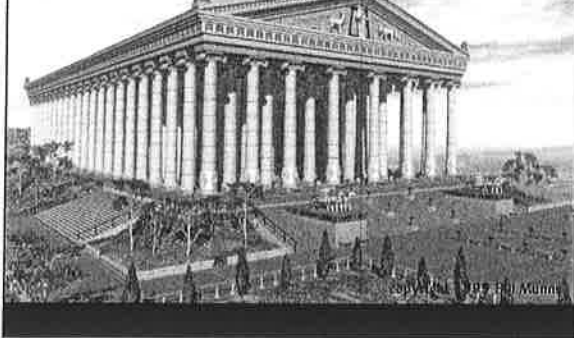
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the course is a reason to stay. Keeping on keeping on is a reason to stay. I'm not egotistical enough to think that you are here because of me. It's true that many of you weren't here when we got here 11 years ago. But you didn't come here because Jan and I came here. You heard about this church from someone else. You saw and heard about our activity with the school kids. You saw us take a Sunday morning and clean up the park. You heard about our support for the Frankton library reading program, or the food pantry or Self-Help. You saw how we were impacting the community and you wanted to be a part of that. We're glad you're here. You're not here because of Pastor Gary. You're here because we share God's love with the community and you wanted to be a part of that. And if you're here, you are now a part of it.

What I want to remind you of today is this: [SLIDE] The main thing is keeping the main thing the main thing. You can't let your mission get hijacked because there's going to be a new person delivering sermons and visiting you in the hospital and being with you at Ad Council meetings. You can't take your eye off the prize because some new guy is going to want to make a change in the bulletin or the way a meeting is run or want to introduce something new to this church family. If you get hijacked or take your eyes off the prize, Satan wins. I don't want Satan to win. You don't want Satan to win. Keep the main thing the main thing.

I have the same confidence as Paul had: what the Lord has begun in you, the Lord will continue in you. Each of you are here for a God ordained purpose. Each of you has [SLIDE] a mission from God. Together all of you are here for a God ordained purpose, a mission from God. God wants you here individually and God wants you here as a family. And what God has started, God will continue. I have faith in God to continue what he started. I want you to have that same faith.

The Temple of Artemis ~
at Ephesus



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Acts 20.24

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