

“Power Revealed”  
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church  
Romans 1:1-17  
July 21, 2019 - Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Our second reading is the opening seventeen verses of Paul’s letter to the Romans. The Roman church wasn’t one that Paul had founded — in fact, as we’ll hear, he has yet to visit this church when he writes. The church in Rome was well-established by the late 40s AD and was predominantly made up of Jewish Christians, when the emperor Claudius exiled all Jews — Christian or not — from the city in the year 49. When they were allowed to return five years later, those Jewish Christians found that the church had now become filled with Gentile Christians.

As we might expect, disagreements arose quickly about who had the better claim to the faith. The church started to split and segregate. Enter Paul, in the mid-to-late 50s, planning to make his way to Rome and to Spain after one last voyage to Jerusalem. Paul writes to the Romans to address the relationship between Gentile and Jewish Christians and God, and to tell these folks that they need each other, that turning inward — away from each other — is not what God intends.

What Paul ends up writing is his *magnum opus*, the most fully developed theological treatise we have from him. The letter is about how, through the lens of the gospel, the promises and plans and purposes of God have been revealed to the world. For Paul, God — the Creator in Genesis, the Covenant-maker with Abraham and Moses, the God of the prophets — has brought world history to its pivot point and climax in Jesus. It is Paul’s responsibility to share this news, and it is his hearer’s responsibility to understand and to respond with a life committed to the gospel.

With all of that weightiness, Paul introduces himself to the Romans in chapter 1. Listen for God’s Word to us:

Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God’s will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine. I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish —hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In 1857 archaeologists in Rome discovered a piece of graffiti scratched into a plaster wall. The very unimpressive artwork depicts a human figure on a cross, but with the head of a donkey or a mule. Next to that figure is a man with a hand raised, apparently in praise. Beneath the image is a message in crude Greek that reads something like, “Alexamenos worships his God.” Experts point out that pagan Romans thought it was pretty amusing that Christians would worship a man who had been executed, and that there was also a misconception that Jews worshiped a god in the form of a donkey.

Paul declares that he is “not ashamed of the gospel” and that in it the “righteousness of God is revealed.” This is good news, transformative news, the culmination of celestial plans unveiled for the earth. And some time later, poor Alexamenos was mocked for trusting in this gospel.

Except, of course, that’s not quite true. The gospel being mocked in the childlike scratches on the wall is not the truth that Alexamenos or Paul or any of those bickering Roman Christians were embracing. It wasn’t about a donkey deity and it wasn’t about Roman torture devices. The piece of graffiti imagines a god who is defeated and ranks with all the other beastly gods. It’s a contained god — a small god concerned with and concerning only a few folks who bow down to it.

The gospel that Paul is writing about is “the power of God for salvation” and it has been revealed for the willing in the world to see. It has been revealed on a big, wild, earth-shaking cosmic scale. God has made visible God’s intentions and plans and power and story in this gospel revelation!

So, what, exactly, has been revealed?

Well, the power for salvation, and for Paul, salvation is about victory over death. And it’s about all things being well. And it’s about freedom — freedom from the misery of the kind of stuff the empire throws at you. And it’s about a renewal of the entire creation!

What, exactly, has been revealed?

Well, the news that God’s work throughout history has all been headed in this particular salvation direction. It’s a history that Paul, a former Pharisee, knows so well. It’s a history of covenant and faithfulness and of God’s people going astray, but being called to return to their God of steadfast love. It’s a history that has burst through time and space, right through the heavens, to walk amongst God’s people and to show them God’s righteousness in grace and humility and resurrection through Christ Jesus.

What, exactly, has been revealed?

Well, God’s absolutely reckless push to work this salvation power through whomever might be a viable conduit. Church folk who’ve spent some time with Paul’s letters have a lot of available adjectives to describe the apostle. “Humble” is not usually one of them. Sure, he’s subordinate to God, but sometimes it seems like that’s about it. Yet in his introduction to Romans we find Paul longing to visit the Roman church so that he can share a spiritual gift to strengthen them — or rather that they may be “mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.” He calls himself a “debtor both to Greeks and barbarians...the wise and the foolish.”

God’s not much for hierarchy, it seems. God doesn’t send all the good learning from the top and let it filter to the less pious. Here’s Paul, the original Blues Brother “on a mission from God” — and he has gained insight and encouragement from people he would not have associated with before encountering the gospel. It’s not just that Paul is able, in retrospect, to see where he’s gotten something from all these interesting people he’s met. He can see that that has happened, and he has future plans to be encouraged by those he would potentially meet in Rome.

What has been revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is a plan for abundant life, for freedom from both eternal fetters and the stuff that holds you back from living a life of abundance here, and God’s immense capacity to work through each of us.

I spend a fair amount of my time in this pulpit griping about the distorted Christianity we see expressing itself loudly in the public sphere. Cruelty, overt and more subtle racism, nationalism, homophobia, transphobia, greed, and violence have all been explicitly connected to Christianity —just in the past week! From the Oval Office to the mouth of the Alabama Secretary of State, ideas and actions that emphatically have nothing to do with love or salvation or the redemption of creation or abundant life or the inherent value of all of God's beloved have been shouted about in the name of God's son.

I'm torn between railing, on the one hand, against these mockeries of the gospel and complaining, on the other hand, that such hate-filled language and policy gives fodder to others who would scratch our names into the walls, mocking what we hold so dear. I really, really want to shake my fist a lot today.

And there is space for that. I make no promises about next Sunday.

But today I hear Paul's words and I wonder what we could do if our response to the stuff the empire throws at us — and at those with less voice and agency and fewer resources — what if our response was to echo Paul?

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel; for it is the power of God for salvation.”

And to then humbly introduce ourselves to a world that is groaning, a world that hears “gospel” and conjures a picture of a donkey, a world in need of both wise and foolish encouragers and life-givers.

I'm in a privileged position as your pastor, and so I know some things that aren't always public. I know about the acts of lovingkindness that you take on each week that seem so small to you, but so impossibly big — revelatory even! — to the ones who experience them. I know how you check in on folks, and bring folks food and company, and wrap your loving households around people who long ago gave up on their own drummers and march to the beats they feel in their chests.

And I know about the acts of subversive justice you enact. It's not showy, the help you offer, the support you extend, the witness you provide, the phone call you make, the resistance you worry is too little. I know how you look for the vulnerable and the ignored and the despised and the misunderstood and how you throw a dash of Christ-given humanity into a world that is somehow both more connected than ever and increasingly disconnected. There is so much unashamed gospel in this congregation.

Y'all, you are no Pauls. You've got humility down. So as we re-gather our community in the next few weeks before school starts, let's reintroduce ourselves to each other, sharing that bold gospel we've been gifted through the generations. Let's seek ways to celebrate and collaborate on life-giving work that reveals the power of God.

In the room next to the crucified donkey-man another inscription was found, made by a different hand. It too sat for a millennia and a half, waiting to be discovered. I don't know if it was a rebuttal by the faithful or the witness of one who saw the truth. It reads “Alexamenos is faithful.”

To all God's beloved in Alabama, who are called to be saints:  
Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen.