

June 30, 2019 Faith Is Like The Canadian Shield Pt. 2
Ephesians 1:1-13

In the summertime we Canadians spend more time out of doors. We drive our cars more and further. We visit parts of the landscape that are meaningful to us. I am moved at the core of my being by water, trees and rock. To me, whether you talk about the gorge at Niagara Falls, or Kakabekah Falls, just west of Thunder Bay, formerly Port Arthur and Fort William, rocks, trees and water is synonymous with the name Ontario. And in fact, rocks, trees, and water, tends to come close to a description of the Canadian landscape. We the north!

The inspiration for this series came out of the little devotional book we place at your disposal on the table at the front entrance of the church. It is a booklet of daily readings, a brief meditation and a prayer. The theme of the particular volume is “bedrock beliefs.” Hence, faith is like the Canadian Shield. Granite that you can see, that you can touch, and upon which we walk, more than the average Canadian realizes. The point is there are foundational Biblical teachings. They are like the footings upon which the house of doctrinal systems stand. Their strength is precisely that they they are Biblical teachings, which led our forefathers in faith that is focused in Jesus, to sing (not just as children, but as believing adults) “Jesus loves me this I know/ For (meaning because) the Bible tells me so.

The first foundational statement with which we began 2 weeks ago is that we are lost, because of our sin. Not sort of lost. Not partially lost. Lost and without hope so far as our humanity's ability to deal with the problem. We cannot lift ourselves out of the pit. We cannot change our ways except that God who loves us beyond our understanding, touches our lives such that we become trusting in Jesus for salvation. God's Holy Spirit renews us. We experience rebirth. We follow a different path than the balance of our world...often with our neighbours scoffing at our superstitious ways, our belief in an unseen God. But we will not be moved!

Last weekend we were away in Etobicoke celebrating our 51st anniversary with Rebekah and Matthew. We went to see "The Lion King" at the Princess of Wales Theater and we went out to dinner together. One of the members of Rebekah's church, the Rev. Cam Taylor, said to me during their coffee hour, that Rebekah had told the story of my Damascus Road experience as a young man. He wanted me to know he found that story very meaningful, and very moving. We love salvation stories, testimonies, especially when we know the people involved. Here is an important insight. Testimonies are like Canadian coins. They are two sided. Heads and Tails! This is the insight. The tails side is the "I decided to follow Jesus for the rest of my life." The head side is the one referred to by Paul in these verses in the Ephesian letter. Paul writes in verse 4, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, For HE chose us in (Christi). When?

Before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in HIS sight.” In verse 5 Paul adds, “HE predestined us to be adopted as HIS sons.” And again in verse 11: “In HIM we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of HIM who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of HIS will.”

Two sides of the same coin. “I have decided to follow Jesus.” It is bedrock like granite. And I did. And I do. But there is another side to the coin isn’t there. “I have been chosen to follow Jesus.” And of God the Lord Almighty I must say first and foremost in praise of HIS holy name, HE did, and HE does.

When I was much younger and just starting out in ministry, I was mesmerized by the fellowship of the Church. I remember my first Synod meeting. In those days more people attended Synod than attend The General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church In Canada. The singing was fabulous. 500 voices lifted in praise of the Lord our God. 500 voices singing “Jesus loves me,” and “A mighty Fortress is our God.” We would hear at least 3 addresses by world class speakers, and I would buy books they had written and take them back north to get more of their insight and encouragement.

At my first Synod the speaker was a Dr. Reid from England. And he was the first person I ever heard talk about Presbyterians as having a distinctive flavor to faith in Jesus Christ. He said the Baptists always bring to the Christian

bounty, that sense of celebration that people make decisions about following Jesus. The Pentecostals bring a unique emphasis on the renewing power and scope of the Holy Spirit. The Anglicans and the Roman Catholics have preserved an ancient liturgy. And the Presbyterians bring an emphasis on the sovereignty of God. And the fact is, more than 45 years later I am still chewing on that thought.

Why mention this Presbyterian distinctive?

Because it plays into the fundamental understanding of our salvation by means of faith in Jesus, crucified and risen. Dr Reid was right. The Baptists do tend to emphasize the weight of the personal decision made by a man or a woman or a young person, to follow the Saviour from Galilee. And we do not ignore that reality, but we tend to emphasize the sovereignty of God in the process. When I first learned the chorus, I Have Decided to Follow Jesus, it was a Baptist friend, a preacher who taught it to me. And he said to me, with a huge grin on his face, "You will probably prefer the Presbyterian version, "I Have Been Chosen To Follow Jesus." Two sides of the same coin. But it is not small change, to put the work of God first, and the work of mankind second. It is important! To us it is incredibly significant, and do not misunderstand, I am not trying to be critical of my Baptist brothers and sisters. It is significant however to acknowledge that God did something first. And even in this matter of believing in Jesus, our action, our works are second to HIS prior expression of HIS will for us.

What is Paul doing here in Ephesians chapter 1? For one thing, he is remembering his own roots. His Jewishness. He was born and raised as a member of God's chosen people. In logical terms he is extending that line of thinking and he is telling the believers in Ephesus that even as the Jews are God's chosen people, those saved by faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God have also been chosen, predestined, to a special relationship with the Lord God, not by their own accomplishments but because of God's grace. And the proof is in the pudding. Here we are, still at work, still worshipping, still laboring to extend mercy and peace to anyone who will receive the Good News concerning the saving grace of God.

That God chose us before we chose the way of faith in Jesus, is also significant. It makes that point that we are not in a position to boast about our relationship with HIS most precious Son. It confirms the point that the choice and the continuing choosing we do to seek the way of the Lord as opposed to the way of the world, or society, or culture, that our choice is rooted in a former choice, a choice God made to seek us out when we were unaware of the degree to which HE loves us. We are not saved by our decision to believe, but by the decision of God to redeem....to send HIS Son into the world, to yield up HIS Son when the world to which we belong cried, "Crucify, crucify, crucify." When the stone rolled away, and Jesus stepped forth from the tomb....God had you in mind, me in mind, to save us from our sinfulness.

Let us pray.

Once again the prayer is in fact the lyric to an old and beloved hymn of praise. In our HYMN Book it is number 506. Let us pray:

Dear Saving God, mindful of us from before the dawn of time;

Your Spirit breathes upon the word, and brings the truth to sight/
Precepts and promises afford a sanctifying light. (2) The hand that gave it still supplies, the gracious light and heat/
God's truths upon the nations rise, they rise but never set. (3)
Let everlasting thanks be thine for such a bright display/
As makes a world of darkness shine with beams of heavenly day.
Thank you Lord. Amen