

“Not a Lighthouse, but a Rescue Station”
 Sermon for 21 May 2017
 Text: Ephesians 1:1-2

I feel constrained to explain myself. When I recently announced that the “gates are open,” I had some very specific things in mind. I had in mind our history, the impetus or soul of our church’s life. A timely examination of some of our foundations is warranted. Isaac Case 1762-1852 whose life and ministry were celebrated at the North Manchester Meeting House, May 4, 2017. Case preached in Thomaston in 1784 and before that, having been evicted from Bailey Island, he had preached in Harpswell. Before the end of April, fifty-four had been baptized. He was pastor in Thomaston for eight years, married Joanna Snow there in 1785, her father, Elisha Snow was “a prominent member of the community.” They, Isaac and Joanna, moved to Readfield on June 17, 1792, upstream on the Kennebec. Isaac would have been just thirty years old.

Isaac was a Revolutionary War veteran and his audiences were, up to that point, largely maritime folk: sailors, merchants, transients and residents. You may recall that at that time Hallowell was an established seaport also, her economy was built on shipping, commerce, and the coastal region was a ship-building center in Atlantic part of the Western world. Isaac Case was a church planter in a maritime province in a very young republic. All of which is to remind us that the setting of his ministry, culturally and spiritually, and the setting of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians are enormously compatible.

Therefore, I want to frame Isaac Case’s church planting ministry, his mission, in maritime terms! That is, we are to think of his church plants (the record says as many as 350 are attributed directly and indirectly to him) as life rescue boats in the coast guard. I know of 28 churches in the vicinity that would qualify as one of Case’s rescue missions including our own church. Each church plant being launched as a manned rescue craft into the stormy sea of this world *to rescue the perishing*. And in this manner they fulfilled the Great Commission: **All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go ye into the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you And behold I am with you always to the end of the age.** (Matt. 28:18-20)

We, the saints gathered at East Winthrop, have as our history ***the great rescue mission*** of Isaac Case, our founding missionary pastor. Yes, a missionary and a church planter is responsible for our even being here. We are a mission station like the coast guard and we send forth life rescue boats. Isaac Case launched these rescue boats, they were church plants. In Augusta, in Hallowell, in Fayette and Litchfield—souls were fetched from the peril and dangers spiritual destruction. He had a congregation of believers who owned as their mission of rescuing the perishing. He had those amongst that gathered congregation those brave, redeemed souls who were willing to answer the call of urgent duty; *they were willing to risk their all* to rescue others—strangers to them. Some thousands of perishing souls were gathered in! In his day, hundreds and through their descendants even more, thousands.

But, if we do not have this mindset, ***this foundational gospel purpose***, or worse if we are oblivious to the danger some others are in, and senseless of the soul peril that

engulfs so many multitudes among our neighbors and fellow New Englanders, many will perish! Because the alarm bells do not ring—and the fog horns have not sounded their familiar signals of distress, sounds that should raise us from our beds of rest and residential repose, we live our lives in a false security.

If we do not respond and send and seek, and dare and do, many will perish eternally. Not only will there be no survivors, there will be no heroes! There is so much more to being church than the maintenance of rescue ships. There's more to life than dry dock and being prepared. We needs must ask what is our maintenance for? What we we trained up for, what are we being equipped to do?

It is true, that many of those in peril have no sense of the danger they are in. They are fiddling on the deck of the Titanic as they sink to their frigid doom . . . or partying on the balconies of Rome as the city was being torched. If so, we are to warn them, and to offer a way out . . . even redemption. They are not okay as they are, and we know that. If all of us are asleep, the destruction will be incalculable.

We have these launches at hand:

- The Bertram seeking pastoral ministry.
- The Smith's embarking on an orphan rescue.
- Mike Whitney's establishing of "Paraclete Ministries"
- The jail ministry, "Ekkelsia" and a Maine Mission to consider

In the past we have had similar launches:

- Camp Butterpoint a joint venture with a black church in New Jersey.
- We launched the von Dukes to Bethany Acres, the Marstallers to Naples—the first failed and the second thrived
- A food ministry that ran for twenty years plus
- We supported the church plants of the Southern Baptists both in Winthrop and in Augusta—again, the first thrived and the second did not.

I want to explore *Ephesians* with you all to get us back in touch with our spiritual DNA, our heritage, history and our hope. We're going to get started on *Ephesians* this morning and we may only get to one or two sentences—which is really okay. Verses 3-14 are, in the original Greek, one long, elegant sentence. It's not the longest sentence in written literature. I think that that honor either goes to Tolstoy, or to a sentence in William Faulkner's short story "The Bear" which runs on like one humongous paragraph for several pages—if my memory is correct. Which is to say: that is one long sentence!

There are several influences pulling me in the direction of this preaching series. There are the launches, the rescue missions that I have detailed already. Not least among other influences is my work directing "The Comedy of Errors" which is set in Ephesus, and draws significantly from this Pauline letter in its thematic matter. I have spent much of the past year looking at and looking into this epistle in various ways, from

various angles. But this morning I want to put forward an apologia for electing to preach on Ephesians. I want to suggest several good reasons for doing so.

First, I am persuaded that *Ephesians* has the capacity to deepen and to enlarge our understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are going to avoid, I trust, the temptation to settle for a few out takes and to be satisfied with that. *Ephesians* is a deep pool and while one can take a shallow dive into a deep pool, the existence of the deep pool opens up some other alternatives, other experiences of the breadth and depth of the love of God expressed to and for us by the gospel of Christ. *It will help us to live for God by Christ*. What does it mean to live for God by Christ—a phrase lifted from the writings of Jonathan Edwards? We are going to discover that together.

I have read that John Mackay, former president of Princeton Seminary believed that *Ephesians* changed his life permanently. At the age of fourteen, he took his Bible into hilly Scotland to study *Ephesians* and there discovered “a new world . . . everything was new . . . I had a new outlook, new experiences, new attitudes to other people. I loved God. Jesus Christ became the center of everything. . . . I had been “quickened.” I was really alive.” I have no reason to question his testimony and no hesitation to pray that we, some of us or even all of us, might have a similar transforming encounter through this epistle. Lord, hear this prayer; it’s an active one.

Second, *Ephesians* magnifies the church, the body of Christ in an outstanding way! Perhaps it magnifies the church the best of all the New Testament letters—at least that is the thinking of some. We shall see if they have anything there. *The church is central to the mission of God here and now, and even eternally*. So it behooves us to master, as best we can, a heavenly perspective on this entity we call church. At the same time, we are told emphatically that the church makes known, discloses or reveals the amplitude of divine wisdom. (See 3:10) So look for the church to be magnified in every sermon of this series!

Third, *Ephesians* has a “contemporary” feel to it. Apart from the slavery issue, this epistle could be read as written to the modern church. In our day. Why? Because there is more of the reflective and less of the corrective in this epistle. It has the feel of pastoral musing, pastoral reflection without the urgency and press of a crisis, or of a specific problem, or error to be addressed. The agenda is open, not laser focused . . . we don’t feel excluded by any date of expiration, or historical/cultural confinement.

Four, this letter is loaded with grace-filled encouragement. It offers relief to the weary, discouraged, beaten-up, frazzled folk who may show up at church any Sunday. Here the gospel is offered like a daily vitamin—we need an everyday gospel! Going from Sunday to Sunday, subjects us to a spiritual deprivation a lot like oxygen starvation. *Ephesians* is like a window thrown open on a fresh Spring morning! There are gallons of bright, clean air to be gulped down. We may be tempted to think that we know the gospel well enough—that may be mistaken. Therefore Paul devotes three chapters to telling us again what the gospel is!

Fifth, *Ephesians* is pre-eminently practical for such a season of newness. There are at least fourteen headings of a practical nature and at the head of the list is” Why

worship?” We will address that question next week! If we were to cover all fourteen topics, we would have accomplished a theology course on “What do Christians believe?” We may be equipped to do a better job of explaining ourselves *to inquiring parties* if we had a good handle on answers to these questions. *The letter is a good gift of God to us.* It couldn’t come at a better moment!

Ephesus at the time that this letter was written was a busy port city, the fourth or fifth largest city in the known world, in a maritime province of Asia. Their amphitheater, the Super Dome of that day, held 25,000 people (est.) It was large enough to host the Olympics and it was located just off the four major roads in Asia Minor—the Interstates of yesteryear. Ephesus was the gateway to Asia (see Acts. 19:10) Ephesus was urbanized. We live in a rural setting but are saddled with an urbanized imagination. Our entertainments, our media are urbanized and as was Ephesus. Yes, there were villages around and about . . . but church planting was *urgently, rapidly* proceeding in the densely populated area. Think of Manhattan, or Istanbul, or London . . . or, in terms of America, Boston, Los Angeles, Chicago, or Houston. *There is a great need for the gospel in these massive, gateway cities and, for the record, these are the places where immigration issues are the most real, pertinent and urgent!*

Sixth, this next note of introduction addresses the matter of spiritual warfare in a storm of sin. Behind the turbulences and strife in many urban cities lies spiritual warfare. Why? Because in places of turbulent settlement, population flux, coming’s and going’s, there are bound to be divergent religions, divergent forms of paganism. Quite shocking forms of religions are found on the same city block. There are sophisticated, highly educated forms of worship and there are more visceral, and filthy and vile forms of worship—both then and there and now and here. Satanism is totally not a thing of the past! Nor has the allure of enlightenment religions like Buddhism and Yoga, Eastern religions and mystical forms, all cohabitant the same city, faded in the least. There are religions based on instruction and others based on experience, on erotica, or on ascetic practices (posting them as polar opposites). There were brothels, where sailors are, brothels are. When Shakespeare alludes to immorality in the mart, he is reflecting the open practices of promiscuity and prostitution which are as old as civilization—of the lack therefore, depending on your perspective—and still in operation. Sensuality, materialism and open perversion were all evident in Ephesus—just as they are in urbanized America.

Seventh, the Ephesians were confronted with emperor worship. It is a little like our own celebrity worship except that Caesar Augustus was addressed as “Savior.” And his birth was hailed as “the beginning of good tidings to the world.” By this I mean to direct us to a “gospel conflict.” The gospel of Augustus, like our new world order, is proclaimed everywhere (coinage, statuary, public buildings and commodities). And it is against that gospel that Paul proclaimed the gospel of Jesus—we are, hopefully, with Paul on this! Opposition and resistance are nothing new. Paul was opposing Emperor Trajan. For us the names have changed. Trajan projected himself as a god . . . but only One has all things under His feet, even the Lord Jesus.

Ephesus was, finally, headquarters for the empire wide cult of Diana (the Greek goddess Artemis) whose temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. It is important to note that there are differences between the two goddesses that are not

glossed over by simple translation. Diana's temple was four times the size of the Parthenon and it used to stand about a mile from the amphitheater! A tremendous business dealing in silver idols, images and trinkets thrived in Paul's day—something as common as tourist souvenirs in our day! Silver spoons from Vienna or Amsterdam. However, the darker matters is the cultural obsession with demons, magic and idolatry that coalesced around the worship of Diana. Sometimes hostilities broke out into the open. (Acts 19:9-10) Paul had an extended stay in Ephesus, lecturing for two years in the hall of Tyrannus, a public auditorium, much like our contemporary community centers, like the Cohen Center. This practice, like a luncheon bible study, or early morning businessmen's breakfast meetings, allowed Paul to engage the culture. Deliverance ministries are also described in Ephesus such as the seven sons of Sceva, a local Jewish chief priest, which ended badly as they (non-Christians) tried to imitate the work of Paul with deliverance "lite"—i.e. words without faith in Jesus Christ! **Apart from Me you can do nothing.** (Acts 19:11-20 and John 15:5) So, it is written these Christians **are turning the world upside down.** (Acts 17:6) However, we must remember that it is not always popular to be right and it is plain that the gospel is not always welcome, or affirmed.

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The Disney film, "Our Finest Hour," depicting for us a daring sea rescue off the Chatham coast in Massachusetts in the 1950's is illustrative. There are 32 men stranded on the *SS Pendleton* needing rescue; the ship has split apart and manages to rest on a reef, awaiting rescue. There is another similar rescue under way so it is up to young Bernie to take three other second stringers out in the motor lifeboat CG 36500, equipped to rescue twelve and he rescues all thirty-two. Amazing, heroic! If the freighter represents the world and the nor-easter the peril the lost are in, the church's rescue role is epitomized by the crew of four reaching out to the thirty-two! It is very clear in this dramatic circumstance that the motor lifeboat has a greater purpose than remaining fit, trim and ready in the boatyard; it is not a museum piece, a curiosity. Further, rescue is a daring venture requiring courage in the face of real danger and potential loss. As the battered *SS Pendleton* goes down, the silent darkness that visits the wreck is eerie, a premonition of death amid failure and destruction—a collapsing world order. Bernie must power his craft across "the bar" and in the process is so battered as to lose his compass—but he decides to continue on course which, *by the providence of God*, takes them to the wreck and rescue. *We affirm the providence of God but the film does not because that is a bridge too far for today's Disney.* I would suggest that this omission helps explain the film's commercial failure—it has failed to net the costs of production—the human interest, even the romantic interest inherent in the story, **apart from God**, are insufficient to bring it success. It should have been bolder, or bleaker! There is no magnificent Father Mapple's sermon on "Jonah," as in the great American novel, Moby Dick, to give the movie depth, or to lend a divine perspective. The 23rd Psalm does make a poignant appearance, in the picture frame of a widow's deceased husband—lost at sea.

Christianity is referred to in Scripture as "the Way," It was and **is** a new way of life. **It was, and is entirely different from all other religions.** How so? It is centered on Jesus Christ. He is the One who makes it possible *to live to God by Christ*. Now we, caught up in a new phase of living by faith (and not by sight), with the unsettledness of that newness weighing on us, may have a timely need for grace-filled encouragement.

The gates of heaven are open. As we venture forward into caring for orphans, in a particular and personal way, and as we prayerfully, lovingly send forth another family into another gospel venture/ rescue (whether by church planting, or by church revitalization) as others rescue missions have gone forth before. Head first into the storm, courage, lads and lasses. As we boldly commit to a fuller missions effort— **wonderful** and, yes, **daunting** and **faithful** ventures these (!), we know that we will be tested in our faith, in our trust, stretched. We may well feel inadequate, small, even insignificant and the Enemy may taunt us with that inadequacy, or frighten us with thoughts of failing our mission, we need to remind ourselves of Who it is in Whom we have placed our trust. It is His adventure. He has supplied life rafts. We are the church . . . we rescue the perishing! Always. You can count on us. We are able because of who we are, because of where we have come from, because of where we are headed and for whose sake!

The gates of heaven are open. I see panic on our Adversary's face! Our God is more than sufficient and more than adequate in everything pertaining to His purposes. Satan knows we cannot be deterred. Our God moved a nation out of bondage, provided for it in the wilderness, and working *wonders and signs* brought them into the Promised Land. He has preserved His church through ages of persecution and oppression—not without some martyrs, not without some cost. But those who suffered for His sake have secured their reward! *And we say, we follow! What is good enough for them is more than enough for us as well.* Our task, as theirs, then is to locate ourselves within His will and leave the results up to Him. In His will we have nothing to fear . . . and yet we are to encourage each other with God's truth from His word, Ephesians.

We are talking about obedience here, not retreat . . . we are moving out, not erecting barricades. *Who would sit this out? Who would settle for the security of the settled, the routine, the safe? I never practiced throwing life preserver rings in order to see them coiled, limp and at the ready.* We cannot row our boat very well if our hands are fastened to the gunnels. Row to them, they cannot row to us. The wind is up, the surf is up. It's time to launch and storm the storm. Our bow, these days, needs must be headed straight ahead, into, through the waves, not drifting sideways, not taking water.

It is a new day. Row. Master the oars. Row, row. Just because something is *difficult* is no indication, necessarily, that we are anything other than in the will of God! Again, it is time *to live to God by Christ* . . . it's an old call for a new day. However, the question I have for us is this: if rescuing the perishing is still our call, if the old call is the real call, how shall we be the Way today together?! Master, let her rip!

Amen.