

Today we delve into chapter three of Ephesians. I hope you've had as good a time as I have looking at this letter and its personal meaning to us. Today's text from chapter three is very personal to me. And I want to make it as clear as I can to you, too, so I'm going to read from the Message translation. Hear these words.

This is my life work: helping people understand and respond to this Message. It came as a sheer gift to me, a real surprise, God handling all the details. When it came to presenting the Message to people who had no background in God's way, I was the least qualified of any of the available Christians. God saw to it that I was equipped, but you can be sure that it had nothing to do with my natural abilities.

<sup>8-10</sup> And so here I am, preaching and writing about things that are way over my head, the inexhaustible riches and generosity of Christ. My task is to bring out in the open and make plain what God, who created all this in the first place, has been doing in secret and behind the scenes all along. Through followers of Jesus like yourselves gathered in churches, this extraordinary plan of God is becoming known and talked about even among the angels!

<sup>11-13</sup> All this is proceeding along lines planned all along by God and then executed in Christ Jesus. When we trust in him, we're free to say whatever needs to be said, bold to go wherever we need to go. So don't let my present trouble on your behalf get you down. Be proud!

<sup>14-19</sup> My response is to get down on my knees before the Father, this magnificent Father who parcels out all heaven and earth. I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit—not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength—that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.

This is the awe-inspiring word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Let us pray for God's Spirit to bring these words to life. O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing in Your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, in whose name we pray. Amen.

My new job is multi-faceted. Just think about the titles I have - Pastor, Preacher, the Reverend, Minister of Word and Sacrament, Teaching Elder, Head of Staff, Moderator of Session, pie baker for the Christmas Bazaar, Funeral officiant, Baptizer, Marriage Officiant, Spiritual counselor, Chaplain, Bible Scholar.

I need a business card the size of a poster board! Or fourteen different business cards for all the different hats I wear!

Honestly, I never assumed to be in a position like this. Never ever. Not even a year ago. I didn't think that there was a church that would want me at the pulpit Sunday after Sunday, or moderating session meetings. I just didn't see that in the cards, so thank you.

And now that I'm here, I'm not looking back! But honestly, if you asked me what my favorite part of this job is, what my personal calling is, I would have to say it's none of those things I mentioned. Not a single one of those fourteen different aspects.

Don't get me wrong. I absolutely love baptizing people – from babies to teenagers who are so incredibly brave to adults who truly have childlike faith. I absolutely love having the best spot of all at weddings, seeing every emotion on their faces as they say their vows. I am honored to be viewed as a scholarly person, and I love, love, love, love writing sermons and then hearing about how you respond to them. And moderating session is ok, too, but what I really feel called, what I would love to spend the majority of my time on, is prophesy.

I probably just terrified several of you. Prophesy is not a word that we hear a lot these days. It sounds so ancient and mysterious and crazy. Prophets in our Bible are people like Daniel and Ezekiel and John who have dark visions of the future and use strange imagery like beasts with the bodies of lions and the wings of eagles and the heads of

alpacas . . . or something like that. Prophets seem dark and gloomy and not the kind of people you invite to dinner parties.

I'm reminded of the character Bruno from the Disney movie Encanto. If you haven't seen it yet, you should. It's about a Colombian family who each have a special gift to use to help the community. One can heal wounds. One is incredibly strong. One can change the weather, and Bruno, he has the gift of prophesy.

But Bruno scares people with his gift. There's a whole song that every single child in my daughter's 2021 kindergarten class would sing all day, every day. "We don't talk about Bruno." The song is about how the whole village blames Bruno for bad things that he said would happen. For example, he told a man with a receding hairline that he would go bald and guess what . . . it happened. He told another that a pet fish would die and guess what . . . that happened, too. Eventually, people were so scared of him that he decided that it would be better if he just disappeared, but guess what . . . it didn't help. It hurt the family. It almost broke them.

The song, and his story, point out the emotional burden that prophets bear because people assume that prophets just speak words of doom and gloom. And sometimes that stereotype is true, but I had a really remarkable professor in seminary who helped me understand the job of a prophet in a new way. She said, "A prophet is not a fortune-teller or a foreteller of the future. A prophet is a forth-teller. One who looks around at the current events of the day and speaks truth to power about things that are out of alignment with the love and justice of God's will. One who speaks with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other."

A prophet's job is to do the following - comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. I'll say that again. The job of a prophet is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. I didn't make that up. It was originally in a newspaper editorial in the late 1800s about the job of a newspaper, but I think it's quite appropriate for a prophet's job description as well.

And you'll find that I try to live in to that calling. As a hospice chaplain for 10 years, I leaned hard into comforting the afflicted - patients, families, and even the staff. I learned how to sit at bedsides with patients and families, exploring stories and relationships, providing rituals and prayers, creating a safe space to ask God hard questions. I became comfortable providing comfort. But when I was given opportunity to preach, I turned my attention to the other side of that calling - afflicting the comfortable. I preached intense messages of challenge and said things that made people squirm in the pews because the majority of us come from extraordinary privilege. We do not know hunger or poverty or injustice the way others do. Our rights are secure, and so, while we all have personal challenges, I felt more permission to challenge the comfortable congregation.

I love preaching from the prophets especially the minor prophets that you may be completely unfamiliar with like Joel, Nahum, Amos, and (sneeze) Habakkuk. Excuse me. I said Habakkuk.

But as I hope you've noticed, I won't preach from the prophets Sunday after Sunday. In fact, I haven't yet. Just wait, though. You'll know when it happens.

But for now, as we get to know one another, the primary thing I need to do, my core function as your pastor, is what our scripture is about today. The Courtney translation of the letter says, "My life's work is to help people understand the Good News (the Gospel). I'm surprised to be where I am. There are so many more qualified people, but I've been given this opportunity to tell people that God's love is for absolutely everyone. And I pray that you would understand that God's love is also infinitely bigger than you could ever imagine. God loves you, and Jesus came to prove it."

This is my job. My primary purpose. My first responsibility. More important than knowing Robert's Rules of Order for meetings. More than officiating weddings. More than speaking truth to power. My purpose in this life, in this job you've entrusted to me, is to make sure you hear the good news, the gospel, that Jesus Christ lived among us and manifested the love of God for all of us in a lifetime of wisdom and service and sacrifice. To make sure that you hear over and over again that God's love for you has no limit. It is wider

than you can fathom, deeper than the deepest ocean floor, higher than the farthest star, and more impossible to understand than differential calculus. (Some of you engineers may think that's easy, but there's a reason I switched from science and math to theology and public speaking.)

The point is, if I demonstrate good administrative skills as head of staff, if I can officiate a wedding to your satisfaction, if I can moderate a contentious session meeting, great. If I talk about current events and injustice and economic inequality and you like what you hear, wonderful. But if I busy myself with those things and you still doubt whether God loves you exactly as you are, then I'm not doing my job.

One the one hand, it sounds incredibly simple, doesn't it? But Paul makes reference in our scripture that he is suffering in the midst of his ministry. Verse thirteen says, "So don't let my present trouble on your behalf get you down."

A preacher's job is not meant to be easy. My daughter asked me the other day why we got a day off on Monday, and I was explaining to her that the purpose of Labor Day is to honor those who work hard and to celebrate what workers have accomplished to build this country. She then asked a follow up question and asked if I had a tough job. I smiled and said, "No. I used to work outside, building houses. That was a tough job, but now I have a job that keeps me inside most of the time, having conversations and reading and writing. I don't have to do as much physical work as I used to."

But Paul reminds me that the job of a preacher can also bring suffering if you're doing it well. You can comfort the afflicted and receive love and gratitude for your care, but you can also afflict the comfortable and get yourself into some hot water, or in Paul's case, prison. Even preaching God's love for everyone can get you in hot water.

If that makes you squirm, I'm sorry. My primary purpose will always be repeating the Good News, that God loves us all. You'll hear it constantly, and I will also point us toward the cross, the symbol that proves that while the savior of the universe spent most of his life comforting the afflicted with messages like blessed are the poor and blessed are those who mourn, he also afflicted the comfortable with messages like woe to you pharisees, you

hypocrites! Thanks be to God he did both, and thanks be to God for this church that has invited me to be pastor, preacher, and prophet. Amen.