

“What an Inheritance” based on Ephesians 1:3-14 and Psalm 24
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on July 14, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Addressing the Assassination attempt on former President Donald Trump:

Like many of my pastor colleagues, I woke up wondering if I needed to rewrite my sermon. And upfront, let me say that whatever your political views, what happened yesterday is terrible. Violence is not acceptable. We mourn for our country. We mourn for those injured and killed.

But rather than making our scriptures for today fit the events of yesterday, I want to address the issue briefly with you right now. My sermon will not mention it.

Yes, we sense the division, the fear, and anxiety in our nation. My hope is that with a biblical and historical perspective, we can choose to be a faithful presence as a church in the world around us. This is important because many are going to be trying to seek worldly reactions to what happened. It is true that we live in a time of great division, but it is by no means unprecedented. The way the world works. Humanity has gone through cycles of unity and division throughout civilization. And today, in many ways there is much more unity, and we need to celebrate that.

And yes, we also live in a time of mass media where things are seen constantly, and it stokes our fear. On social media, every ember is fanned into flames. This reminds me of the turmoil after the invention of the printing press, when all of a sudden, new ideas were scaring people in different directions. But at the same time, new ideas can calm our fears and foster collaboration and growth.

And yes, we also live in a time of great anxiety and our young people bear the worst of it. This is also true, but it is also not unprecedented. Every generation faces its challenges. When I read this morning that the shooter was just 20 years old, it reminded me of Gavrilo Princip, the 20-year-old Serbian nationalist, who 110 years ago shot and killed the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie. His shots ‘heard-around-the-world’ ignited the First World War in Europe.

In times of unrest, it is especially difficult for young people in their late teens and 20s. This is because at this age, you figure you’re an adult and you’ve got it all figured out. You feel ready and capable of making changes. But you also see how slow change happens. I know I was that way.

I think it’s no coincidence that all but one of the 9/11 hijackers were in their 20s. It’s no coincidence that John Hinkley Jr. was just 26 years old when he shot and wounded Ronald Reagan in 1981. Mehmet Ali Agca was just 23 that same year when he tried to assassinate Pope John Paul II. Sirhan Sirhan was 24 when he killed Robert F. Kennedy in 1968. Lee Harvey Oswald was 24 when he killed John F. Kennedy. John Wilkes Booth was 28 when he killed Abraham Lincoln.

In fact, if you look at a list of the Founding Fathers of this country and their age in 1776, you will be shocked at how many were between the ages of 18 and 30, There were 18-year-olds like James Monroe and the French general, Marquis de Lafayette. There was 20-year-old Aaron Burr and his 21-year-old rival Alexander Hamilton. For the British and for those less inclined to favor the revolution, they were probably not seen differently from how we see this list of assassins and terrorists today. This is a theme throughout history that goes back even to the Roman emperors.

My point is this: Our young people bear the brunt of the frustrations in this world. I think sometimes those of us who are a little older now lose sight of that. Think back to when you were

in your late teens and early 20s. I know I was not the person I am today and, honestly, I was a bit volatile. Our words, our divisions, our anxieties, all flow down to them, and probably to the younger ones too. They feel the pressure and the frustration in a different way than we do.

So, if you feel like you need to do something right now because of what happened, check in on the people in your life who are in their late teens and in their 20s. Share your love for them with them. Listen to them. Listen to what they have to say. Hear their frustrations.

As Christians, our faith is grounded in our God sharing in our humanity and dying for us. This is empathy and self-sacrifice to the greatest degree, and what does it lead to? A new creation. Yes, right now, we cannot fully embody others in the same way Christ embodied our humanity, nor are we necessarily called to die for one another in the same way as Christ.

However, we all need a Christ-like of empathy for the people around us. We all need a Christ-like dose of self-sacrifice to put the needs of others ahead of our own. We need an awareness also that we are not alone, that we are loved, and that God is with us.

Tragedy still happens. It's been on a downward slope since that day Jesus died and the resurrection was just the beginning of an improved and better world. But sin and death are still here, and they claim to have power over us. Our hope though is in the resurrection. Our hope is in the power of God's love. Remember that and share that.

Sermon on Ephesians 1

In 2022, a Swedish woman asked a question on social media. Saskia Cort encouraged her followers to ask the men in their lives this question: *"How often do you think about the Roman Empire?"*

The question trended in Sweden and was written about in a local paper. As it turned out, Swedish men often think about the Roman Empire. Nearly a year later, a Swedish Roman War re-enactor, *(yes, they have those for Roman wars and not just in our country for the Civil and Revolutionary wars)* asked the question again, this time in English spreading the question to the United States.

As it turns out, American men also think about Rome a lot. Every day was the most common answer, even three times a day, or all day from some. I must confess for myself that I'm a bit obsessed. Yet I can honestly say that part of my job is to think about the Roman Empire, and I do so to help us understand the context of the New Testament. Understanding scripture depends on understanding history, because in every text, there are things being communicated which are not said in the text. This is because people knew what was meant since in that time they would have known the context.

For instance, it's been 10 months since the "think about Rome" trend exploded in the U.S. Still, you may find someone who posts, "this is my Roman Empire," and it's a shorthand. What they mean by this is that this is an unexpected or niche obsession. For instance, if I were to post about my obsession for a particular television show, I might say, "Welcome to Wrexham is my new Rome." You might not know the show, but you would know it's something I like a lot, more than expected and maybe a little too much.

Someone reading that today might know what I'm talking about without explanation. But at some point, maybe even already for many of you, explanation will be needed. Someday, someone may have to explain what I meant. They will have to decipher and interpret what I wrote.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he uses a lot of references and language like this. These are things that would have made sense to readers in the time it was written, but that meaning is hidden today unless we unpack and decipher the text. My plan is to walk you through this letter this week and six weeks after, for seven weeks in total. It's important then that we understand the context then, so we can better apply its teachings to our lives now. In particular, we'll focus on the city of Ephesus itself and life in the Roman Empire.

So, I'll start with some background now. Ephesus was located on the coast of what is now Turkey, along the Aegean Sea. It's directly across from Greece, so Ephesus connected East and West in the Roman world. Trade routes from as far away as Persia, modern day Iran, stretched by land to the east all the way to Ephesus. One legend claims it was founded by an Athenian prince, who established the Ionian League of 12 city states which banded together for defense in western Anatolia. Another legend says it was founded by the Amazons and named after a great queen, which is why the main worship there was of the goddess Artemis, who was a great hunter.

Regardless of its founding, it was at its height around the time of this letter. Emperor Augustus in 27 BC named Ephesus the capital of Anatolia, or Asia Minor, and by the mid-first century, it was one of the largest cities in the empire. Because of its location on the trade routes, it was a trendsetting city. When you think Ephesus, think modern day New York or Los Angeles or Paris.

It was the type of city where traders from everywhere enter and trends go out from there. At its ancient peak, it boasted 250,000 people. It was home to the Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The great Library of Celsus was in Ephesus, and the city is described with great splendor. They had marble streets, a bustling center of commerce, two open air markets, many shops, a large theater that featured plays and athletic contests, even those which rivaled the Olympics. It had huge estates, mosaics, statues, frescos, and more.

This city was a shining jewel for the Roman Empire and in a key strategic location, both for trade and the spread of new ideas, whether Roman ideas or new ones like the gospel of Jesus. News coming from Rome meant to go out to the provinces would have certainly gone through Ephesus. Likewise, news from the provinces would have surely gone through Ephesus to get back to Rome.

Our letter was likely written from Rome with Paul in prison, and by writing to Ephesus, Paul likely knew that this message would be copied and spread out from there. This is why I think Paul is writing a more general theological letter and not direct instructions to the Ephesians like you see in the letter to the Corinthians.

There are some scholars, but it is by no means a consensus, who doubt Paul wrote this letter. These dissenters are following the lead of German scholars from 150 years ago. These scholars claimed the Greek was less polished than Paul's undisputed letters, and this is true: Our reading today was just one sentence in Greek. That run-on is really hard to make sense of in English unless you stop it in spots and add a few things. Now, as someone who has received the advice that sometimes I do that – and that I should stop in spots and start new sentences – I sympathize with Paul on this one.

Second, they don't like that Paul emphasizes Jesus's divinity as much as he does in Ephesians. They think this shows a later progression in theology though nearly everyone accepts Philippians as one of Paul's earliest letters and it has the highest language in this regard.

And third, and I think this is the key one, the letter this letter pushes the value of the church as a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural entity that is greater than any single nation or empire. I think this is the reason they wanted to reject Paul as this letter's author. These scholars were writing in a time when the nation state was seen as the new ideal.

We think of nation states as normal, but before the 1700s and 1800s, the idea of a single nation state with one culture was not on most people's minds. In most of the world, people centered their lives on their extended families, tribes, and city before any nation or empire over those things.

For instance, the Holy Roman Empire was a confederacy, wherein city states and provinces had princes. Those princes ruled over various tribes and lands, and they allied to elect an emperor. Their allegiance was to their local land and prince, which was key to the spread of the Protestant Reformation. The actual Roman Empire of Jesus's time was a collection of conquered cities. When you defeated the city – remember the sack of Jerusalem when all of Judea fell – the areas around fell with it. It was the city states that people were connected to.

So, then it's only been about 300 years or so that the idea of a homogenous nation, made up of a people with a common language and culture became popular. And so, the idea of a Spain was one of the first and England set the tone for the rise of France, the rise Italy, and eventually the rise of the first German nation in 1877. These German scholars saw homogenous cultures and nations as ideal. Some of them would later embrace Nazism.

A multi-ethnic church as the foundation of life was a big problem for them and they also had a desire to do away with miracles and anything that was not scientifically verified. Ephesians is really hard to deal with if you want to get rid of those things because the letter doesn't say what these scholars thought the bible should say.

So they took relatively minor language issues and made them out to be allegedly verifiable proof, even if they knew Paul admitted to using scribes in other letters that he dictated. While imprisoned way out in Rome, may not have had the scribe of his choosing for this letter. But what's more, what do run on sentences mean apart from his enthusiasm for what he is saying.

I do believe Paul wrote this letter because I believe that he knew that sending this letter from Ephesus, it would go out and reach the many different cultures ruled over by Rome. Ephesians puts front and center the value of multi-diversity and argues that it is the point of the good news of Jesus is that all people belong to God, just as we heard in Psalm 24. All the earth belongs to the Lord.

I believe Paul is writing to this important, cosmopolitan city on the trade routes to say that where cultures worship Jesus as God side by side, that's good news. And Paul's little run-on rant today sets the tone for this letter. Paul tells his readers then and us today, that we are blessed in Christ Jesus. This is not the word we translate as blessed in the Beatitudes, like "blessed are the poor." That word *Makarios* meant to be made large, to grow close to God. No, this one is the word from which we get eulogy. It means good word, good reason, good rationale. It means to speak well of.

Paul then starts by saying we have reason to speak well of God the Father of our Lord Jesus, in whom we are spoken well of because everything good in the heavenly realms is ours. Indeed, this is because before the foundation of the world, God had us in mind. This plan included us, to be adopted children of God through Jesus.

What I referenced at the beginning about understanding context comes into play here. When we hear “adoption” we think of adopting a child. We think of giving a family to someone who is without a family. We think of giving someone opportunities they didn’t have otherwise. In Shelby Presbyterian Church, we know very well. We know what a blessing adoption can be.

Yet, this type of adoption being the primary reason for legal adoption is relatively new. In fact, you could say it is the result of Christian influence. It’s not that people did not take in children to give them a better life. In fact, the Christians became known for rescuing exposed children and orphans. But the idea of an individual adopting a child as their heir was not done out of compassion or love to embrace that child. It was done as a power grab to secure and protect a fortune and a future.

This was the time of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. The people of Ephesus would have known that the Emperors who adopted grown relatives as their children so they would be heirs to the throne. They knew well that the emperor at the time of this letter was the adopted son of Emperor Claudius. They knew Emperor Nero was adopted as a teenager by Claudius and that he ordered the killing of the actual son of Claudius after he was adopted. Claudius rejected his own son and adopted Nero because he thought he would be a better representative of him. For the ancient world, adoption was not about compassion. It was about power.

See, you may find it odd, but thinking about Rome a lot can help us understand scripture. We are empowered by our adoption as children of God. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit. So, I’ll jump to the end of our passage today, where Paul writes of our inheritance. For Nero, the inheritance was the empire of Rome, but for us, our inheritance is our redemption, becoming God’s own possession to share God’s life.

The Holy Spirit, Paul says, is the advance, or the downpayment, that God gives us now, with the payment in full to come with the new creation ushered in by Christ’s return. Bottom line, the Eternal Son of God is the only rightful heir of God. Therefore, since he shared in our humanity, we as human beings have been joined with his divinity. We who give our allegiance to him as King, or Messiah, are adopted by God.

That’s right, the Son of God, fully one with God and equal to the Father, came down to share in our humanity and live in our limits. He did this not for his own benefit, but to share his inheritance with us. And yet, humanity rejected him, killing him on the cross, but his blood is our redemption, by which, our sins are forgiven, and all people are made right with God.

Sisters and brothers, as we journey through this letter for the next month and a half, remember that you are loved and the God who made all things knows you by name. Because God shared in our human life, you have been called to share in God’s abundant and eternal life. This the destiny set by that inheritance. You are a child of God because Jesus is your brother.

Beloved, you are called regardless of your accomplishments or your failures. You are called regardless of where you were born or what culture you inhabit. This is the good news – you are a child of God the Father, through the Son, and God is with you in the Spirit’s presence in and among us. This is not just for right now and it’s not just for the age to come. It’s for both.

This love and this life are our inheritance now and forever. What an inheritance indeed. Amen.