

<sup>4</sup> But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup> not the result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

**Eph. 2:11** So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— <sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

A few Sundays ago I mentioned traveling down south to visit my brother. I had never been down I-77 through West Virginia and Virginia before. So the first time we were headed south, we were in that part of Virginia, close to NC, and all of a sudden you look out the car window to the left and you see this giant valley, and you are just amazed! That view changes everything! All of a sudden, the earth is even more beautiful than you thought it was. That experience has taught me that our perspective on things really matters. Perspective is literally how we *look through* things, how we perceive them, and understand them. It is interesting what we say when we start to understand something in a new way. We say “Oh, I see.” Actually we could see before. But now we see in a new way. It is my goal for us to come to see this day in a new and profound way, and a way that has always quietly been there.

Our lesson this morning from Ephesians is one of my favorites, and it includes the title of my words today: “...*you who were once far off...*” Let’s jump right into this. Again, this is going to be a matter of perspective. We need to not just see something quickly, we need to see through it and into it. The writer here is doing exactly that. These words might shock us a little because we do a lot of assuming. We assume that we Christians have always been God’s favorites in the world, that we alone are God’s people, and that we probably always have been. Right? If nothing else, it is how people claiming the name of **Christian** have often acted in history. Think about **The Crusades** so many centuries ago. Christian armies walked across the world to go take back the Holy Land, which clearly belonged to Christians, so they thought.

But the writer of Ephesians has a big reminder for us in particular: ***So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth,...<sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.***

Gentiles. That is not a big word in our vocabulary. But it is a very big word in the Bible. It refers to the people who were in the world who were not God’s original *called* people, the Hebrews. Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, David. This was a tiny group of people, created by God so that all the families of the earth would be blessed. But then there were all these other people, including our distant relatives. And what are

we told about them? They were once far off from God. In fact they were without hope and without God in the world. That doesn't sound like our people were always the insiders, the favorites, the beneficiaries of the covenants of promise that were made with Abraham and Jacob, Moses and David. And we are told that we hit the jackpot, not because we deserved it, but because God wanted to do it. God always wanted to open the door so that all the families of the earth would be blessed because of this original family of Abraham.

We Christians claim to really love the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is wonderful. And Isaiah ends with a dramatic surprise, in its very last words. It closes with these words...

For I know their works and their thoughts, and I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory, <sup>19</sup> and I will set a sign among them. From them I will send survivors to the nations ... to the coastlands far away that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations. <sup>20</sup> They shall bring all your kindred from all the nations as an offering to the LORD ... to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the LORD, just as the Israelites bring a grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. <sup>21</sup> And I will also take some of them as priests and as Levites, says the LORD.

For as the new heavens and the new earth,  
which I will make,  
shall remain before me, says the LORD;  
so shall your descendants and your name remain.  
From new moon to new moon,  
and from sabbath to sabbath,  
***all flesh shall come to worship before me,***  
says the LORD.

This has all come true. I saw it with my own eyes yesterday. I heard it with my own ears. I stood next to the casket of my

friend's 60-year old wife who died suddenly last Sunday, at a cemetery in Litchfield, Ohio. And they played a popular country song that was heart wrenching but beautiful. I didn't really know the song. It spoke of how a sweet person had died and was now joining a group of angels who were singing around the throne of God. It was quite a powerful song! And what were they singing? In our minds it was just one word, but in reality two. The words look like this:

הַלְלוּ-יְהוָה:

Does that look like something that came from our European ancestors? And yet the most powerful, beautiful words in the song at the graveside, the most holy words, were the words from the people of Abraham of long ago. But Isaiah said it, so we should not be surprised. ***All flesh shall come to worship before me.*** All flesh, including and especially those who were once far off. Like all of us. But there is one more perspective that needs to be understood, and I had never heard this perspective until riding my exercise bike a few months ago during the winter, and reading a book I had owned for decades but not read. I have mentioned the book by Rev. Paul van Buren. He talks about how we have to walk our own path, we have to adjust our beliefs to deal with the new troubles of our world. Let me share his perspective that I hope will become your perspective.

I had never thought of this before, but on Easter we usually do the the Apostle's Creed. Have we ever noticed that there is only one human name in all of that theology? There is one name only. Pontius Pilate, as we call him. And what are we told about him? We are told that he was the boss under which Jesus, a Jewish servant of God was crucified and murdered. The Romans had come to take Judaea almost 100 years earlier. They came to the holy city, Jerusalem, the ancient holy city of the people of Abraham. They built their own big fortress there. And there it was that by their gentile earthly power, they killed another Jewish man. But, God would take this tragedy and give it the ultimate redemption. The death of a servant of God at the hands of the gentiles would be the very thing that would open a new door to these gentiles being connected to this same God of Abraham, this God of Israel.

Allow me to share this great quote from Paul van Buren regarding this new perspective:

***“Jesus, who has and continues to embody that plan, and so is God’s Word and Son, was given over to the Gentiles, so that Gentiles through him might worship and know the love of the LORD, the God of Israel. Through Jesus, the Son of God, we dare to join Israel and call on God as our Father too.”***

That might be the most profound thing I have read in a book in my life. The God of Life, the God of Israel, uses a Jewish man in order to connect us to God’s very self. Not only can we never forget this; but we must perceive this and know it

deep in our hearts. There is no room for arrogance on the part of the ones who were once so very far off. At least there should not be. There should not be. There should just be the most humble thanks given to God, eternal humility on our parts.

I was never quite the same after that first time I looked out over that beautiful sight at the last miles of Virginia. My perspective had been changed. And now, thanks to wise words of a special man who served God, the Church, and all humanity, my perspective is changed again. And that is what I got for Easter! Jesus has become Christ for us so that we can know the God of Life. Tell someone about this. AMEN.