

## Clear Enough?

*(This message is part of a series on Romans titled "Based on a Promise, Called for a Purpose.")*

### Romans 1:18-20

It's one of the great, often true stereotypes about men in our culture. Here's the stereotype: men usually don't like to ask for directions or even read maps. I know, I know, some guys aren't like this, but they just stick out and prove the rule most of the time. Is there a more iconic beginning to a fight in books or movies or TV? The wife says: We're lost. The husband says: No we're not. The wife asks the husband to stop for directions. The husband refuses and we're off to the races...

Julie and I went to Normandy last year, and even though neither of us speaks French, we always knew where we were because the signs were so clear. Everywhere we looked there were arrows pointing to exactly what we wanted to see, and at the very least there was always one large sign that said 'OVERLORD,' the operational name for the D-Day invasion. Seriously, I remember thinking to myself that you'd have to be blind to get lost along that northern Normandy coast.

*18The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.*

Before we get into that it's worth a reminder of the point of Paul's letter to the Romans.

Romans was written to convince one group of people that God could be trusted because of his faithfulness to another group of people.

Let me say that another way:

The letter to the Romans was written to convince the Gentile Christians in Rome that God could be trusted because he kept his promises to his Jewish covenant people.

It was also a reminder to the Jewish people that they hadn't left their old faith behind for a new one, but that Christ was the completion of the faith they'd held all along.

Last week we heard Paul say 'I am not ashamed of the Gospel,' and the point of that for us as we move deeper into this important letter is that **we stop being ashamed of the Gospel when we accept the fact that the Gospel isn't ashamed of us.**

So what about our text this morning?

It introduces a section on the state of things when the world rejects God. It starts with an ominous sentence: 'The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against godlessness and wickedness' ...let's come back to that one.

Then there's a section listing a broad range of examples of what happens when people lose sight of God, followed by an explanation of God and people and sin and judgment that is rooted in the Jewish tradition—in the Jewish world view.

So let's talk about how Paul addresses some of these things in our text this morning.

The first thing that jumps off the page is this business about the 'Wrath of God'. We all have an image in our minds of what that might be. Lightning, plagues, hail, floods—there are all kinds of images we conjure up when someone mentions God's wrath. For some people it confirms the worst about what they think about God and the Bible and Christians. Why give your life to a faith that's rooted in fear of the wrath of a God you can't even see?

But as you read through the rest of this chapter you'll find that what Paul is actually describing is scarier than that. He says that when people choose to reject God...God lets them do it. Paul says: 'Therefore God gave them over' to whatever it is they wanted to do instead of worshipping and serving God. What? No fire...no brimstone? That doesn't sound very wrathful.

But it does sound strangely loving. It's the tough love that people talk about sometimes—when a parent has to make the painful choice to let a child make their own mess...and take the consequences. It's when we stop enabling someone to keep on living in any form of self-destructive behavior—when we stop shielding them from the consequences—in the hopes that they'll be shaken back into their senses.

God's wrath is simply that he allows his people to go their own way—the way they choose for themselves.

That leaves a pretty comprehensive list covering everything from slander and gossip, questions of sexuality, and even arrogance and boastfulness. Let's be clear about this part: none of the individual sins here are worse than any of the others. It's the idea of sin itself—the things we do that separate us from God and from God's ways—that's what Paul is teaching us in this section of his letter.

But then we're left with what God tries to do to bring us back to him—this idea of the 'Visibility of God'. Through it all God tries to make himself plain—even obvious—to the world he made. The call to notice and follow: God's 'eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen', Paul says, 'being understood from what has been made.'

Most of us at some point or another, as we have struggled to know God and to believe that he really exists—most of us have said something like: 'O God, I'd believe in you if you just showed me a sign.

That's what's behind those stories we see every so often about someone seeing Jesus or the Virgin Mary in a piece of fruit or a ham sandwich. It was the foundation of the controversy over the Shroud of Turin. It's that moment that everyone has experienced where we're sure we would be the people God called us to be if he would just show himself to us.

Does that ring true for you? Wouldn't we all love to see a sign that proved beyond any doubt that God existed? What sign would be good enough?

Frederick Buechner imagines a story in his book, *The Magnificent Defeat*. After

hearing the collective cries of his people for a sign, God reaches into the heavens and rearranges the stars so that they spell out 'I EXIST' in every language. The response is dramatic: Stadiums and arenas can't contain local churches; elderly Christians weep at the confirmation that their faith has not been in vain; doubters and scoffers turn to God in passionate faith. After a period where the the Gospel spreads to every corner of the earth, a man walks with his young son to look at the night sky. As they stand together, hand-in-hand, reading God's unmistakable self-revelation, the boy turns to his father and says,

'So what?'

The signs that pointed to God's existence had become so commonplace that those who had not known life without them failed to understand their message.

The point here is that the real question isn't about whether or not we get to see a sign. The real point comes in the form of a question: Will we see the signs for what they truly are? Remember where our passage comes from—it's a part of the introduction to an argument—to Paul making the case that God could be trusted in Rome and beyond because he had been faithful to his promises to Israel.

But even that's not the heart of the matter. At the very core of this section of Paul's letter is something that's true for every person whether we admit it or not, and here it is:

*Something or someone is going to be lord in our lives.*

Bob Dylan said it a different way, of course: 'You're gonna serve somebody.' Either way it's true—each of us will make something lord in our life. The question that each of us has to answer is 'who or what will it be?'

There's no shortage of choices. People turn all kinds of things into gods for themselves: wealth, power, sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll, even safety. Money as a god has taken a beating in this past year, but even that one is always going to make a comeback.

We're all going to choose something to be the lord of our life—it's the way we're

wired. Remember that Paul has a goal in this letter—he's trying to get Roman Christians to trust God because God has been faithful to his promises in the past.

He knows that God gives us all the freedom to choose whatever we want to follow as lord. Paul's goal is to convince as many people as possible to choose Christ for that important job.

But first we have to notice him. First we have to see the signs.

The call on us in this passage is to see the indications of God in the world around us—not just in nature but in the beauty and creativity we see in the culture, too.

The call is to see all of that—to see the way that God communicates says 'I EXIST' through the world around us—to see all of that and not respond by saying 'So what?'

The call on us is to seek out what we can learn and experience and even know about God through our interactions with Creation, with each other and with the culture.

But even that isn't enough. Today especially, as we remember World Communion Sunday, it's important for us to remember that the practice of the Sacraments in worship is one critical way we experience God—experience the sacred—in our regular lives.

In the book that guides the worship in my own Presbyterian tradition, this is what it says about Communion—about the Lord's Supper.

*"The Lord's Supper is the sign and seal of eating and drinking in communion with the crucified and risen Lord...On the day of his resurrection, the risen Jesus made himself known to his followers in the breaking of bread. He continued to show himself to believers, by blessing and breaking bread, by preparing, serving and sharing common meals...The New Testament describes the meal as a participation in Christ and with one another in the expectation of the Kingdom and as a foretaste of the messianic banquet."*

Communion is just one of many ways God makes himself known to us. We're going to talk about more of those in the coming weeks and months.

But for now, maybe we have to train our eyes to see—maybe the signs have been there all along and we've gotten out of the habit of seeing them. Maybe we've chosen other gods and we don't know how to get out from under those decisions and change our lives.

Whatever might be holding you back, the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that it's never too late—there's no place you can go that's too far.

**There is no shortage of ways we can find ourselves lost, but nothing we've ever said or done or even believed before this moment can separate us from the one who made us and loves us.**

As we come to the Table today my invitation to you is to experience the presence of the Risen Christ in a real way. To see this meal as a 'participation in Christ and with one another' in the expectation of the Kingdom, and as a foretaste of the Great Banquet God promised.

The invitation to all of us who are coming in faith is to see God in the bread, in the cup, and in each other as we share this small feast.

It's only appropriate that as we come to the Table we remember the one whose Table it is. We come as faithful people to worship and adore Christ the King. As we prepare our hearts today, let's stand and sing another hymn out of season: 'O Come All Ye Faithful'