

“The Seal of our Inheritance”

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³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:3-14)

One of the things Molly gave to Kate for Christmas this year is a wax seal with her initial on it. It came with a candle and a little metal crucible to melt the wax, so that a little dollop can be poured over the envelope flap. The stamp is then gently pressed into the soft wax. The seal adds a touch of elegance, formality, and gravity to any message that Kate might want to send. A person opening a letter bearing that seal will know that it is special.

As we do our best to hold onto the spirit of the season of Christmas, which does officially last twelve full days up until the celebration of Epiphany, this passage from Ephesians describes the greatest gift that we all received this year – the blessing that comes to us through the birth of Christ. To understand the breadth and depth of this gift, we need only follow the references to “us” in the opening of this letter. What is the nature of the gift we have received in Christ? Through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, God blessed us... chose us... and destined us for adoption as God’s own children. In Christ, God bestowed us with glorious grace, lavished us with the riches of forgiveness and redemption, and made known to us wisdom and insight into the mysteries of God’s plan for things in heaven and things on earth.

All of this, together, is described in this letter as a sacred inheritance that had been passed on to the church in Ephesus. The Ephesians received this inheritance when they heard, accepted, and trusted that they really had been blessed, chosen, and destined to be God’s children in Christ... that they had indeed been bestowed with grace and lavished with spiritual blessings... that amazing truths and wisdom really had been made known to them. As the 19th century biblical scholar Barton Johnson put it, the Ephesians trusted in what they heard. “They not only hoped, but believed”



and obeyed.¹ Just like the shepherds who came to the manger, the Ephesians put their trust in the message they had received from God, and decided to go out in search of the good news that the Lord had made known to them.²

That was amazing enough, but there was more. When the Ephesians decided to receive and take hold of this sacred inheritance, the package came with a seal. In a legal context, a promise that is not only signed but sealed carries greater weight. It is elevated, formalized, and made more official. It guarantees the authenticity and credibility of the sender – the one who is making the promise – as well as the validity and enforceability of the terms of the deal.

So, when the Ephesians received the good news that Paul had carried to them on his missionary journeys, when they accepted the gifts of God in Christ as their inheritance, that gift was sealed with the power of the Holy Spirit. More accurately, that seal was affixed to the people themselves. *“When you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him,”* the letter says, *“you were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people.”*

What that means is that they were marked in a way that would be obvious to the world. It would be obvious that the people of the church in Ephesus were children of God. That mark, that seal, was essentially a downpayment, a foretaste of what life in the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Again, in the words of Barton Johnson, the seal of the Holy Spirit “was God’s authentication to the world that the converts to Christ were accepted as his children,” that the world would see in them “a new life exhibiting the fruits of the Spirit” – things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and generosity. Through the seal of the Holy Spirit, the believers in Ephesus received an advance on the rewards of life in heaven, and the world would see, in them, what heaven was all about.

One of my favorite Christmas gifts this year was this little red book. It is a treasure that Pat Allen found on eBay. She was online and decided to do a quick search for “Larchmont Avenue Church” to see what might pop up. And what popped up was Decade, a history of this congregation from 1922 to 1933. It is copy #5 of one thousand printed, and it is signed by Rev. Robert Russell, the second pastor of LAC, who likely wrote most of the book. These are the first words of the first chapter: *“In the beginning was the dream... beloved dream... bright and beautiful and not to be denied... vivid, urgent and interwoven with faith and hope and love... the will to worship together, to build together a temple to God.”*³

What follows is a detailed history of how a small group, led by Miss Emily Earle Lindsley, made that dream “a living reality.” From the initial gathering at her home at 39 Larchmont Avenue in May of 1914, the book charts the early story of what became Larchmont Avenue Church – the movement of meetings to the carriage house of a neighboring home, which Miss Lindsley used as her art studio, where crowds were so large that some had to gather around the doorway in the garden under the canopy of a cherry tree, which I imagine was much like the ones that

¹ B. W. Johnson, “The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians, Chapter I,” *The People’s New Testament* (1891).

² Luke 2:15.

³ Decade: 1923-1933 (New York: Isaac Goldman Company, 1933), p.1.

stand today outside on Forest Park Avenue.⁴

From there, the book shares beautifully specific details of our inheritance as people of God in this place, an inheritance that has been blessed and secured by the seal of the Holy Spirit...

- As winter neared and the weather turned cold, a little wood stove was procured. Worship and Sunday School began to grow. Bessie Cowdry donated chairs... First Presbyterian in New Rochelle donated some old collection plates that were used to serve communion... Mrs. William Shelton loaned a small pump organ, and the first pulpit was cobbled together by affixing an old drawing board to a newell post taken from the local YMCA.⁵ ***This commitment to faithful, regular worship is our inheritance.***
- By February of 1915, just ten months after the initial gathering, the tract of land upon which we now sit was identified and purchased for \$5,000. A wooden sign was quickly erected, which stated simply, "This is the proposed site of the Larchmont Avenue Church." Excavation began in May, and before Christmas an initial structure of the basement level was completed.⁶ ***This village land is our inheritance.***
- By 1924, the congregation and Sunday School had outgrown the basement church. In June, Emily Lindsley was asked to break ceremonial ground on a new "Church House" on the Wendt Avenue side of the property. As soon as her shovel broke the surface, it struck a stone. She paused and turned to the gathered crowd with a grin. "Do you see," she said, "it is founded upon a rock."⁷ ***This faith that our very existence is founded on the solid rock of Christ, this is our inheritance.***

Rev. Russell, writing in 1933, put it this way. "Working together... hands busy with weaving patterns dear to the heart, minds active with planning ways and means to achieve a common goal, never weary of going about doing good... bound together by working together... the various [parts] of the Larchmont Avenue Church, each in their own way and after their own fashion, seek to serve."⁸

"Everybody helped," he said. "The community was of one mind... 'Make Larchmont a better place to live in.'"⁹

That, my friends, is our inheritance. It was true then, and it is true today. The people who first gathered together as a congregation in this place understood that they too were inheritors of the legacy embraced by the Ephesians thousands of years before. Like that church of old, our forebears on this corner "*heard the word of truth, the gospel of [our] salvation, and believed in [the promises of Christ].* And when they did, they "*were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit... the pledge of our inheritance... as God's own people.*"

⁴ *Id.* at 1-2.

⁵ *Id.* at 2.

⁶ *Id.* at 3.

⁷ *Id.* at 5.

⁸ *Id.* at 6.

⁹ *Id.* at 5.

For thousands of years, each generation has embraced that inheritance in its own time and in its own way... “working together,” as Rev. Russell put it, being “of one mind,” seeking to serve, never growing weary of doing good and making this world a better place.

This is both a challenge and a privilege, Rev. Russell wrote ninety years ago... in his words, a challenge and a privilege “to follow Him who is the Way, the Truth and the Life” ... to engage in “greater fellowship in worship and witness” ... “to meet human need” ... “to share friendship with those who are alone, to steady those who drift, to bring hope to those who despair, to lift Christ up before those who are confounded, to light fires for those who are cold, to feed the hungry, to provide rest for those who are weary and heavy laden, to heal broken hearts.”¹⁰

In September of this year, we will celebrate the centennial of the church house that, in our founder’s words, has always been founded on the rock of Christ. What better time could there be for us -- not just as people who come to church, but as committed, motivated and joyful disciples of Christ -- to lay claim to this inheritance that is clearly ours?

May that be so in this year and all that lay beyond. ***Amen.***

¹⁰ *Id. at* pp.28-30.