



**“REMEMBERING BEFORE WE KNEW”**  
**SCRIPTURE: ACTS 19: 1-7**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**Sunday, January 7, 2024**  
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

**Acts 19:1-7**

19:1 While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. 19:2 He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." 19:3 Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." 19:4 Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." 19:5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 19:6 When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— 19:7 altogether there were about twelve of them.

The Word of the LORD

**Thanks be to God**

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Yesterday would have been my grandfather's 122nd birthday. January 6, 1902 he was born in Franklin, TN. He was a Presbyterian minister serving churches in Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Missouri.

He lived through so much history. During his life, the airplane was invented. The advent of motorized cars, the widespread use of telephones in homes, the beginning of widespread use of the radio, the invention of the television, the invention of computers. Two world wars. The Great Depression. The Korean War. The Vietnam War. The Civil Rights movement.

In 1985—the spring of my sophomore year in HS, my American History class included a project in which we were supposed to find someone who lived during the Great Depression and talk to them about what it was like. I chose my grandfather. In our phone call, he shared vivid details and memories. He had notes from all the things he bought back in the 1920s so he could tell me exactly how much he paid for a pair of shoes, exactly how much groceries cost, how much he paid for a train ticket.

Just a few days after our phone call he fell in the shower at Camp Burnamwood in KY, the Presbyterian church camp I grew up going to. He was there for a presbytery retreat and reportedly having a wonderful time before the accident. They rushed him to the hospital and he slipped into a coma just after my father arrived at the hospital.

My grandfather passed away 2 weeks later having never regained consciousness. When I went with my dad to pack up my grandfather's house, I found the notes he made for our conversation about the Great Depression on a notepad by the phone. I kept it as a reminder of how precious that moment was for both of us before we even knew it.

I think of my grandfather a lot since I followed in his footsteps as a pastor. I especially think of him this time of year, not only because of his birthday, but because of my baptism since early January is always when the church year reminds us to remember Christ's baptism. My grandfather baptized me when I was a baby. He baptized all of my sisters. And my dad baptized all of his grandchildren, too. And my dad was baptized by his grandfather as well.

So much about my grandfather is about remembering before I knew. His life was a link to a world that felt so long ago. And his life was a link to a memory about me that I have no conscious memory of because I was just a few months old. The waters of baptism always flow with the past and future—through us—like life-blood, like the cells in our bodies, like our DNA.

I know my grandfather's pastoral heart and his dedication to the life of faith live in me—it was in my blood before I even knew. He teaches me from way back in a past I didn't even participate in, how to pastor in these turbulent times in human history.

I have always been thankful for that school project that gave me a reason to talk to Grampy on the phone. That was before I knew that he would be gone in just a few weeks. We were remembering together before we knew this would be our last chance to talk.

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Life is full of moments like that. Moments that we only know the importance of in hindsight. Moments that end up being so very precious, so very formative—when at the time we may have just been going through the motions, we may have been distracted, we didn't have the information we needed to understand what we were experiencing at the time. We may have even resented having to do it at the time.

I am sure you can think of times like that for you. A goodbye you didn't realize would be forever. A hello that you didn't anticipate changing the course of your life. A chance

encounter that protected you from something. A split-second decision that shifted your entire perspective on who you are and how life works.

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The moment in Ephesus when Paul encountered the believers who had never heard of the Holy Spirit sounds like one of those times. They thought they understood themselves until Paul explained the Holy Spirit to them. Then Paul laid on hands and they received the Holy Spirit. Their capacity changed, their skills changed, their abilities, their bodies, their mentalities—all shifted and changed because of this encounter.

Before they knew it, their lives were on a new path and they had entirely new ways of connecting with God and with the human family.

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Do you believe the Holy Spirit works this way? And by this way, I mean, in transformative ways? Do you believe that the Holy Spirit can change you, can change us? Can change history? Can change my story, your story, our story?

What if I tell you today that it doesn't matter if you believe the Holy Spirit works this way or not. The Holy Spirit is going to do Her thing whether we believe it or not.

***This story about Paul's connection with these early Jesus followers is really not as much about belief as it is about trusting a God we actually barely know even when we think we do.***

The life of faith is all about God embracing us, claiming us before we even know who we are ourselves. Our belovedness, our embrace in the arms of Divine love—these realities of who we are—well they are true about us before we have anything to say about it. And they are true about us when we say we are distanced from God. They are true about us when we don't even believe in Divine Love.

Perhaps our biggest barrier to knowing these things about ourselves is that it is easier to believe other things about ourselves than that we are beloved.

It's easier for us to believe that we are deficient, that we are damaged, that we are guilty, that we are a burden, that we are unloved, alone in the world, different than everyone else. It's easier to believe that something is wrong with us. It's easier for us to believe all these

things about ourselves than it is to believe the most primary fact of our existence—that we are loved and beloved from the very beginning and until the very end.

The life of faith is really about finding the courage to claim this belovedness for ourselves and for ALL people and making life from that reality instead of all the false narratives we have been taught and tell ourselves over and over again...

The irony is that Christianity kinda got this part twisted up and made the entry point sin instead of belovedness. Sin was a much more lucrative doorway for the institutional church. Tell people they are doomed without the church's intervention, and that the church holds the key to salvation, and you'll get more people coming to church and you'll get more of their financial resources, too! Fear and guilt and shame are powerful motivators—but they lose their power when we start to get healthy and free. Or when we find something to distract us that is more comfortable.

If we are true to the Holy Spirit's promise to heal the human family, then we have to start with our belovedness, not with sinfulness. This twisted, gnarled up, misuse of sin really has done a number on us. It's made it so hard for us to trust the Spirit's movement in our lives, because it is hard to trust our belovedness. Sin has its place, but it's not the primary place. Losing our connection with our belovedness is actually something that estranges us from God and from each other—the definition of sin.

We can get so caught up in “I must have done something wrong to deserve all the bad stuff that is happening to me.” And we allow our inner critic, our inner protectors, our wounded child to be the loudest voices we hear. And we lose sight of the “no matter how painful the experience, God is right here, Spirit is right here—loving me, equipping me, whispering in my ear again and again about who I really am.

We can drown out the voice of the Spirit that says over and over again: there is nothing you can do, nothing that can happen to you, that can take away your belovedness.

How different would the world be if we all knew this about ourselves—if the church had been the messenger of this truth of our belovedness all along?

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Grace Covenant, we are in a time of deep transformation. All of us can feel it happening and see it happening. Some of us, however, are not ready to embrace it and trust it. And some of us who are embracing it can still get distracted by that pull toward anxiety and fear, allowing our first energy to focus on people who are leaving, or people who are sowing

seeds of discontent. Those are not things we need to ignore or deny, but they are not the focus of what the Spirit is doing in our midst. They are evidence that the Spirit is truly moving in our midst.

The Spirit's power to make a way where we don't see one, to change our perspectives when we didn't realize how limited and skewed our perspectives were, to show us that we are capable of things we didn't have any idea we could do—these seismic shifts in life are not easy for any of us.

The Spirit is going to do what She is going to do—whether we are ready or not. The Spirit was changing lives before those 12 disciples got it in Ephesus. And the Spirit is changing lives here at Grace Covenant whether we have 129 pledges or 229 pledges. The Spirit is changing lives and teaching us to remember our belovedness in ways we may not even be able to recognize yet.

Just when the Spirit is building momentum and movement, we rejoice with all the new people finding their way here and with all the ways our community is embracing the transformation that is under way. And all of these things also mean there are some who are deciding Grace Covenant is not where they want to be anymore.

As a pastor, I believe that faith journeys are never ours to judge. Spirit is gonna be Spirit no matter where we do or don't go to church. So as a pastor I can always find a way to bless people when they feel they need to go.

As a believer, I feel some other things when people leave.

When people tell me they are leaving because of how worship is changing or because we talk about white supremacy culture too much or because they don't like the music or the vocalizing people do during sermons or the difficult topics we are engaging—when people tells me they are leaving because they feel no hope here because of how much we talk about white supremacy, I feel the sting of the human family working at cross purposes with ourselves. I feel the loss of how the church has formed us mostly in habits of judgment and separation, mostly in habits of estrangement and superiority, rather than in belovedness and collective liberation.

Church was never supposed to be about enforced conformity or about one right way or about white ways being right ways. Jesus was not about any of those things!

Church was never supposed to be about shame and silencing and shunning. Jesus was not about any of things.

Church was never supposed to be about dividing people or overpowering people or harming people. Jesus was not about any of those things.

If church is about Jesus then it was always supposed to be about our belovedness first and foremost. It was always supposed to be about our collective liberation—because that will ALWAYS be where our belief in our shared belovedness will go—Belovedness and Liberation always go hand in hand.

Church was always supposed to be about the truth and how it can set us free.

If we're supposed to tell this truth in this country, in this community, on this planet in this moment in history—then we have to talk about white supremacy culture. We have to call it out—we have to exorcize the demons that have kept us numb and complacent, that have kept us resistant or obstinate when it comes to real, faithful transformation.

Transformation cannot just be words—it must be embodied, it must be collective, it must be Spirit led.

The slate of officers we are going to vote on today in our congregational meeting is a beautiful touchstone of the transformation that is happening at GCPC.

I wish everyone could embrace this transformation because I believe with every fiber of my being that it is God's doing—and that we are being called into a new day and a new way. None of us could have predicted that we would be where we are today. None of us did this on our own. Spirit is doing it both through us and in spite of us all at the same time!

We may have thought we got it before now, but we were wrong, we were misled—we didn't have the whole story, the whole picture—maybe we didn't have the Holy Spirit or enough of Her to feed and fuel the deep healing that we need.

Spirit has been working in and through this congregation for over 70 years—and whether all of us could see or remember or know – She is here, She is telling us who we have been before we even knew.

Maybe some of us didn't know what Grace Covenant has the capacity to become—maybe none of us knew. But the Spirit is asking us to remember something about ourselves that goes back to before we knew anything about who we are becoming today.

The human family can only be brought back together through our belovedness—that is something we all share in equal measure. There is no one superior to another when it comes to belovedness.

None of us can know the full impact and potential of what we are a part of right now at Grace Covenant. None of us can fully take in the healing opportunities that are right here. Someday we will look back and remember what it felt like to trust God before we knew what we can know only in time, in community, in our shared belovedness.

I pray for us every day, GCPC, for all of us—the early adopters and the doubters, the ones who can finally feel at home in church and the ones who don't know where they fit anymore. God is able to hold us all.

And if you believe in love, if you believe in liberation, if you believe in the possibility of the world becoming a place where all living things can thrive—then stick around, and hold on to each other, and when it's especially hard for you, trust God more than you thought you could. Trust the most elemental promise that God makes in every human life—the promise we remember in baptism—that you are beloved, that each and every one of us is beloved.

And that we learn about that belovedness most robustly in community. In baptism we claim that we need community—that we are equipped to make and keep a faithful life in beloved community—the way God intended it to be before we even knew the power of the love we all come from, that we all carry within us.

These days, these weeks and years of Grace Covenant's life are more precious than we can even see now. Someday may we celebrate just how precious it will all prove to be.

Thanks be to God.

(Go to Communion Table—connect Baptism and Communion)