**Built on a Firm Foundation**

**Text: Ephesians 3:16-17**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Helen and I had such a great trip that it’s tempting to tell you all about it this morning. 2 problems with that: it wouldn’t be a sermon, and it would be incredibly boring; like those slide shows that our friends and relatives use to give of their trips back in the day. But I do want to tell you about one thing that especially got my attention in Montana. It’s called the Going to the Sun Road. It runs the width of Glacier National Park and it climbs several thousand feet to cross the Continental Divide. The views are spectacular but the drive is a bit unnerving because it’s a narrow road that hangs on the edge of a sheer cliff. There isn’t a whole lot between you and the valley below! The road is an engineering marvel built nearly 100 years ago and you have to wonder why it hasn’t tumbled into the valley. The answer is that it is built on a firm foundation. When they blasted the right-of-way out of the mountainside, they created a bench of very firm rock upon which they built the road. Some of that rock is quartzite, which has been melted and hardened and made strong by millions of years of intense pressure under the earth’s surface. A firm foundation, which has withstood erosion, avalanche, gigantic winter storms, and the pounding of millions of vehicles for nearly a century.

The Church is likewise built upon a firm foundation, as Paul points out in his Letter to the Ephesians. That foundation is all of the saints and the apostles who have gone before us (Ephesians 2:20). And, deeper still, that foundation is Jesus Christ. The *Church* is built on a firm foundation: not just this church but the Church universal; the body of Christ in *every* age and place. And we who call ourselves Christians are rooted and grounded in this foundation, that we might stand firm against all of the powers and principalities that threaten to overwhelm us and co-opt us and erode us into the abyss below.

Hear how the apostle puts this in Ephesians 3:16-17: “I pray that, according to the riches of God’s glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.”

 There is no firmer foundation that the love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ and placed beneath our feet by the Holy Spirit through the Church. Through her preaching and teaching, her stories and her liturgy, the rich symbolism of her traditions and the singing and fellowship of her people, the Church has rooted the people of God in the saving grace and the unconditional love of Jesus Christ our Lord. Through the power of prayer, offered as God’s people gather in worship and prayer groups, and offered as well in the solitude of our own sacred spaces, we further access the tremendous strength of this firm foundation that can neither be shaken nor destroyed by anything that the world or the cosmos might throw against it.

You know, the powers and principalities that seek to destroy love and life and justice: they play a great deal on our fear. Maybe we won’t have the money to do what we need to do. Maybe the environment is going to be destroyed. Maybe immigrants are going to storm our borders and somehow take over our country. Maybe the future is bleak and the possibilities are limited so we have to circle the wagons and protect ourselves and try somehow to survive. Maybe that’s the best that we can hope for.

But that’s not what Ephesians says. That’s not what biblical faith says. The future is full of promise and possibility because God is waiting for us in the future, God has paved a road for us to the future, that road has been built on a firm foundation and that is the very road upon which the Church is traveling even as we speak, and pray, and engage in acts of service. It’s all been worked out by God in eternity, and God has elected us in Jesus Christ to be part of its unfolding in history.

Prayer is the key. Almost the entire passage from Ephesians that Francena read for us this morning is a prayer. “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,” Paul says, and then he goes on to pray that the Ephesians might know the fullness of the wisdom and the power and the love of God. “For this reason I bow my knees in prayer,” Paul says, and “the reason” to which he refers is the power of God to overcome all divisiveness and unify all things in the mystical bonds of love. God has done this, God will do this, and the Church is charged with the awesome task of making this victory known to the cosmic powers that would love to do nothing more than destroy all that God has done. God has done great things, God is doing great things, God will do great things in this place and in every place where Jesus Christ is proclaimed, and we access that incredible power especially through prayer. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” Paul says elsewhere to the Philippians, and he can say this because he’s spent so many hours on his knees accessing that power through which all things are possible.

The congregation that I served some 25 years ago had a group of prayer warriors that made a huge difference in the way in which that congregation turned around and found a new mission. When I arrived at that church it seemed to sit on anything but a firm foundation. It had been through some shaky times, it had lost quite a few of its members through a fight over the issue of ordination and sexual orientation, and it was tempted to circle the wagons and go into survival mode. And, of course, if a church is opting for mere survival, it’s not engaged in outreach and mission and evangelism and seeking the Kingdom and therefore it’s not really being the church! Nevertheless, when you’re fearful about the future, survival mode looks awfully attractive. But there were some folks in this congregation who took seriously the power of prayer. And I didn’t even know about them for the first 4 or 5 years that I was there. I’m not even sure that they ever got together as a group. But gradually I became aware that there were these – I don’t know – 2 or 3 or 4 individuals who in their own quiet way were praying for the church and praying for individuals in the church and in retrospect it seems to me that their prayers played a big role in the way in which that church found a new mission and new life. New folks started to come, a new spirit infused the place, and the congregation discovered a new mission that included a refugee ministry and a healing ministry and a willingness to engage the community around it. The shaky foundation upon which it was leaning became a firm foundation upon which ministry could thrive. And the power of prayer blasted away the loose rock and helped to create the new roadbed.

It’s not *all* about prayer, but it’s *at least* about prayer. Because prayer is one of the primary ways in which we access the power of the Holy Spirit. But it’s also about worship, because when we gather together in this place each Sunday, we tell stories and offer-up symbols and engage in rituals which put us in touch with a Reality beyond ourselves. They ground us in the One in whom all things hold together. The powers and principalities of this present age want us to be divided and confused. They anger us and frighten us and try to stir-up a lot of chaos. They get us so frightened and confused that we’re tempted to think that consultative processes that have been developed in the Church and government over hundreds of years are no longer to be trusted, and that only a strong man can save us. So we see mega-churches that come together under a *strong* leader; only to fall apart when he retires or dies or gets caught-up in a scandal. And we see countries around the world abandoning democratic processes and trusting the promises of one man who is tempted to claim almost savior-like status. Why? Because in the midst of chaos and uncertainty we become afraid. And in our fear we’ll grasp at almost anything or anyone who promises a better future of unity and prosperity.

But there’s only One who can actually deliver on those promises, and that One is the Creator of all things and the Sustainer of all things and the Ground in which all things hold together. And I don’t know about you all, but when I sit in the quiet of this place, when I gather with you all around this Table, when this chalice is lifted up, when the diverse voices of God’s people come together in beautiful harmony, when God’s light shines through these beautiful windows, when the wind of the Spirit blasts through this mighty organ, when we embrace one another in the passing of the peace, in these rich symbols and in so many more rituals, we are caught-up in the One who unifies all things; caught-up in the Power at work in our midst who can do far more to bring in a glorious future than any human power; caught-up in the awesome Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

Prayer and ritual and symbol and people gathered together and encouraging each other: these are all ways in which we tap into the cosmic unity and the cosmic Power which sustains the Church and the world and ushers in the future. The Power who is above every power is our Firm Foundation. And sometimes it takes hard work and the heat of controversy and even death and resurrection for that Foundation to remain firm. Think of all the heat and pressure that first melted and then hardened the quartzite that undergirds the Going to the Sun Road. Think of all the blasting and building that created that road. Think of the agony of the Cross and then the joy of the Empty Tomb, through which salvation has been revealed and the Church has been formed.

No one ever said that it was going to be easy. This business of finding a new mission and moving into the future: it’s tough work. Sometimes it’s painful work. Jesus can tell us all about that pain. The good news is that the future which we seek is already there, waiting for us. We just need to move toward it. It’s like the glorious scenery along the Continental Divide: it’s already there. It isn’t going anywhere. All we have to do is brave the hairpin turns and steep drop-offs. All we have to do is head uphill, and trust in the Firm Foundation who is Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.