

Sermon – March 10, 2024

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Ephesians 2:1-10

Who here remembers ever hearing the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin? Not *Ray* Hamlin, our beloved church treasurer, or *Kay* Hamlin, beloved member of our Welcoming Team... this is Hamelin, Germany, back in 1284. For today, I'm just gonna recap the *beginning* of the Pied Piper story, because it has to do with something that our reading from Ephesians is trying to get us to recognize.

Legend has it, that the town of Hamelin was dealing with a plague of rats... until a man dressed in flashy, eye-catching clothing walked into town and said he could do something about the rat problem—for a price. What the man did was to go around town in his eye-catching clothes playing an entrancing tune on his flute to draw in the rats. One by one the rats were drawn to him, following him like he was the only thing that mattered in the world, and he walked them right out through the gates of the town and down to the river. The rats, who only had eyes for the piper, followed him right into the river, and they all drowned.

Our Scripture reading reminds us how easy it is for *us* to fall into the same trap that the rats did in Hamelin. In Ephesians 2 we're reminded of the tendency of *all* of us to get caught *up* in *everything* that's flashy and shiny and exciting and passionate in this world—to the *exclusion* of *all* else—and how *easy* it is for the idols of this world... to drown us. But it *also* reminds us that this *world*, full of beauty, *was* created by God—and that *we*, born of *flesh* and made in the *image* of God, were made by God for a reason. Living *in* this world *is* a part of our *purpose*, and no matter how easily this world can sometimes swallow us whole, God reaches out to us with a grace that overcomes *all*... and God's grace can lift us out of any river we might get caught up in.

God made us to do good, Ephesians says, to magnify the good in this world, to double it and triple it and take the leaps of faith necessary to improve the lives of others and heal whatever brokenness we can find. But God knows—and I say that unironically—God *knows* that it's easy for us to get... distracted from the good we're meant to do. To get caught up by something shiny and alluring, or sucked in by something strong and overwhelming.

But our reading reminds us that God doesn't give up on us all the times we let things in this world drag us down. God doesn't write us off as lost, or condemn us to our fate.

"By grace you have been saved—and [God] raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." Note that it doesn't *just* say God *will* raise us up—God already *has*. We once were lost but now we're found, and odds are at some point

we'll probably be lost again. But God's grace—the grace that made us, taught us, relieved our fears... and saved us the *last* time we stumbled—that grace is always reaching out to do it again. The *faith* that Ephesians is talking about is the faith to reach *back*, to let the song of God's *grace* guide us, not the song of a piper in flashy clothes.

I want to talk more about what I mean by getting “caught up” or “sucked in.” Because if we can keep in mind the ways we can get *lost* in this world, the easier it'll be for us to *grab* on to God's *grace* for stability. For a... center. Something to reach out to when all these other gravitational pulls start *pulling* us one way or another.

So... *imagine*, if you will, a big hunk of rock floating through the darkness of space, like an asteroid or a rogue moon or something. And *one* day it comes across a much larger planet, like Jupiter or Saturn, and gets *caught* in the planet's gravitational field. The planet's gravity is *strong* and holds *onto* it, and it gets stuck *circling* the planet. It stays there, orbiting at the same distance, the planet and the rock reflecting light back and forth at each other.

Now, if it's far enough out, we get something like our *own* moon up there in the sky, circling for 4.5 billion years and still going strong. But if it's circling too *close*, that's when the problems start happening. You see there's this thing called the Roche Limit, discovered by a guy named Édouard Roche. Think of it as an invisible, mathematical boundary—a *danger* zone—around *anything* that's big enough to *catch* stuff in its gravity.

So let's say an asteroid comes across a planet like Saturn or Jupiter and starts orbiting it, but instead of orbiting it at a *safe* distance, like *our* moon, it *happens* to get drawn in too *close* and starts orbiting somewhere within the planet's Roche limit.

Now, science shows us that *everything* has its own gravity. Stars, planets, you, me, salt-shakers, motorcycles—you name it, it has at least a little gravity. We don't notice it, because we're really small and we're on Earth—not out in space—but *everything* has its *own* gravitational force that holds *it* together and keeps it from falling apart.

But if this asteroid I was talking about gets caught within the Roche Limit of say, Saturn—the gravity of the *planet* starts to compete with the gravity the *asteroid* uses to hold *itself* together. Bit by bit the asteroid's torn apart, and eventually the whole thing turns into space dust. That's the danger *inside* the Roche Limit.

This dust *continues* to orbit, all around the planet... and eventually becomes what looks from a distance... like rings—like the rings we see around Saturn today. But it's not really an asteroid anymore, is it? The influence of the planet completely took it over and destroyed it.

The analogy I want to make here is that each and every one of us is like one of those asteroids. We're living our lives, floating along in a *busy* universe *full* of things to orbit.

And we need to orbit *some* things, right? Life can be cold and lonely without *anything* to... grab on to—something to keep you from getting lost out there in the dark. Ideally we find a solar system *full* of life-sustaining planets that we can orbit among at safe distances. Not too close, not too far. "*Goldilocks* zone," not "Roche limit."

For *us*, though, it's not *planets* we're sharing this solar system with. For us it's concepts and possessions and people. Even emotions. Things like money or country or food, *people* we learn from or idolize or love... confidence, anger, even compassion. All these things have *gravity* of their own; there's *benefit* to *being* in their orbit... and they *all*... have a Roche limit.

The author of Ephesians could see the same thing I'm sure we've *all* seen, in others or ourselves. He saw the people of the world orbiting dangerously close to the gravitational centers of this world. "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world... All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else."

Now, "flesh" isn't inherently evil in and of itself. The Psalms tells us we are beautifully and wonderfully made, and the Gospels remind us that the Divine itself came to dwell among us as flesh. To deny our very fleshliness and the *needs* of our flesh—food, rest, joy—is to turn our noses up at a gift *God* has *given* us to make the most of. But, Ephesians recognizes—as we should too—the dangers of making the wrong *things* the very *center* of our lives, and losing ourselves. Orbiting *too* close to earthly things can tear us to pieces as easily as a moon falling into the Roche limit.

*Food* helps us grow strong, fuels us for the life we live and the good we do, and it gives us joy and opportunities for community. *But* if we start eating too much unhealthy food too often, we can start to experience health problems.

The same is true for *everything* we orbit in this world.

In this world... we have to have *money* in our orbit, right? It's a fact of living in a capitalist society. You orbit *money* at a *safe* distance, and it can put food on your table, a roof over your head, and allow you to do real good in this world, *and* maybe have a nice vacation every once in a while.

But if we let money and the *love* of money *draw* us in, and get caught *up* in it... if we focus our lives *too* much on money and accumulating money and *wielding* money, then it too can tear us to pieces... until we are nothing but a selfish, greedy shadow of our former selves.

On either side of the Roche limit, *people* can be teachers or obsessions... *confidence* can be life-giving or just narcissism... *anger* can spur us to action against injustice or it can consume us.

The author of Ephesians looks at a world full of people in decaying orbits, people spiraling deeper into the idols they've made of the powers of this world, gazing too deeply into the abyss and following all those pied-pipers a little too closely... But he doesn't look on in *despair*, because he *knows* there is a power both greater and gentler than the powers of this world. A sun that's brighter and stronger than *any* planets in the solar system, *and*—as opposed to the *actual* sun in the sky—this one doesn't *have* a Roche limit. This one isn't limited by the rules of the world. It doesn't destroy that which loves it... that which *it* first loved.

“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... and raised us up with him... For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

God doesn't give up on us all the times we let things in this world drag us down. God doesn't write us off as lost, or condemn us to our fate. God has faith in us... so that *we* might have faith in God, and in so doing *find* what it is we need to *do* the good God wants us to do in this world.

So when the gravitational pull of the powers and principalities of this world starts to tug too strongly on you, or you start to realize you've strayed into the Roche limit of something you're maybe orbiting a little too closely... *know* that, unlike an asteroid, you're not out of options. God's grace—the very grace that gave you life—is shining down on you, reaching out to you and calling you to reach back, so that you might have something to *grab* onto to keep your head above water.

*God* doesn't have a Roche Limit that would tear us apart if we got too close. God's the very thing *keeping* us from falling apart in the face of all the other things that try to... exert their influence on us. If we hold on tight to God, we *can* find a way to orbit all those other planets out there *without* letting them *rule* us *or* tear us to pieces.

“Halley's Comet” has been orbiting the sun for thousands and thousands of years—bopping around our solar system, swinging past the planets, and even getting lost in the dark—but it always manages to make its way back home, doesn't it?

May it be so for us too, with the light of God's grace to guide us.

