

Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 21, 2018

Text: 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Theme: "Lasting Scheme"

Your brothers and sisters of the South Sudan Evangelical Lutheran Church send you their greetings and their thanks. It was a blessing to be there. It was a time to encourage and be encouraged. It's a long ways from here. I made it back in Jonesboro on Tuesday, around 8 pm, I think. This was the end of 40 hours of travel and about 4 hours of sleep. When I took a look at myself in the mirror I was a little shocked by my appearance. It was good to go and it's good to be back.

What is life like in South Sudan these days? I can only speak from my own experience, most of which was in Bortown. I saw a lot of encouraging things. The marketplace area in Bor which had been almost totally destroyed by war at the end of 2013 has been rebuilt. Business seems to be good. There are plenty of people making use of the marketplace. I stayed in a hotel that had been built since my last visit, The Park Palace Hotel. It had a reliable electrical supply, solar panels plus a diesel generator. The power was on the whole time I was there. There are many children. The Block Six Lutheran Church seemed to have more children than I remembered from before. The school at the Longbar Church, St. Augustine's Academy, has 288 students in 8 grades led by seven teachers.

The church has grown. One, pastor, Santino Manuel, started a congregation in the refugee camp in Uganda. He then went to the Upper Nile State in South Sudan and has now started 5 churches. This is in an area in which there are many Muslims. I got to meet

him. He was one of the pastors that came in for the teaching. The pace of life is slower in South Sudan. People take much more time for one another.

Not all is encouraging. There has been hyper inflation. Last time I was there the exchange rate was around three South Sudanese pounds per dollar. Now it is 192 pounds per dollar. The pile of money you carry to the marketplace may be bigger than the pile of goods you get in return. They have become very good at counting money. The war has not totally been settled. It could be leadership is more concerned with maintaining position than servant leadership.

So how are things in South Sudan? Actually Paul tells us today in our text, “For the present form of this world is passing away.” (1 Corinthians 7:31) Things are passing. It’s true for us also as it was also true for Paul’s hearers in Corinth. The same could be said for conditions in Nineveh in the 8th century BC, the form of this world is passing away.

We could say the scheme is passing away. Now when we hear “scheme” we may think of the negative connotations of planning in a devious way to get one’s way. It does have that aspect, but as a noun it can be much more neutral. It’s the plan, the systematic way it all fits together. It is also the Greek word that is translated “form” in our text (*sch/ma*, *schema*). The scheme of the cosmos is the work of the perfect Creator.

God created it all, all the cosmos described in Genesis 1, water, land, sky, sun, moon, stars, all plant and animal life, but really more—all that is seen and that which is unseen. And then the crown of creation, mankind, male and female. God’s scheme one man and one woman in the one union of marriage. God made it and God holds it all together, all spinning at His direction and will.

But we know there was a lot of scheming challenging God’s scheme. First from that realm of what usually is not seen, the one who seemed to think it would all be better if he

were god. So he rebels, but it becomes obvious being god is not in his future so he schemes to wreck havoc wherever he can. He goes to the crown of creation and suggests it would be better if they were gods. He knew right where to strike. God had said not eating was good and eating was bad of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. He told the woman God had this thing turned on its head, really to eat was good, and not to eat was well, losing out. Eat and be like god knowing good and evil. Set your own rules about what is good and what is evil, rearrange things to your own suiting.

But the rearranging brings nothing but trouble into the scheme. It is doomed to all fall apart. We have a little sample in Nineveh. There the wickedness has become so great that God is about to pull the plug. He gave them a 40 day deadline, sent a prophet to announce it and call to repentance, a prophet who needed a lot of repenting of his own, and who is unhappy when his message is actually heeded. Because God is long-suffering Nineveh was not destroyed. Because God is long-suffering it was not over at Genesis 3. Everyone of us should a divine paycheck coming to us that reads, “pay to the order of _____,” and then on the amount line, “eternal damnation.”

But God did not leave us to that. The Creation comes into the scheme of His creation to lift our sin from us. He is the true light who has come into the world. In Him there is no darkness at all. He has become flesh and made his dwelling among us full of grace and truth. In Epiphany the light comes on, this One is different. He is doing things no ordinary man can do. Today we see Him calling four fisherman to follow Him. And they drop everything and do just that.

Following after Him will be quite the walk. His followers had their own scheme in mind as to how this should look. But His scheme did not fit theirs. It was not the earthly reign they supposed. The old foe thinks he is having his day and having his way as the

eternal Son is dying on a cross. His scheming is successful, but he is about to find out that his scheming is subject to God's grand scheme for salvation. The Son dies, is buried, but descends in victory, rises from the dead and ascends to the right hand of the Father. That sin that would drag us down to hell, all sin, he took on Himself. We are now buried and raised with Him in baptism.

The scheme of creation is still in place, the cosmos still turning. God's design has not changed. His commandments are still the way for His creatures to walk in this world. It's how the whole scheme is to operate. We are walking after Jesus in the light of His World. We have His example. He was tempted in every way but never sinned in any way. Our motivation for walking after Him is love. In Christ we move from the first use of the law, fear, to the third, love. Our walking is not to win His favor but of those who know His favor. As we so walk God's name is hallowed and our neighbor is served.

Yes, we are redeemed in Christ, our sin lifted from us, covered over with His righteousness. God's scheme is still in place, but the smooth operation of it is hindered by sin. We live in a wobbly world. Our text is a small part of Paul's answer to questions he has been asked, "Now concerning matters about which you wrote." (7:1) How does one live out the faith in this wobbly world? How do will live among those who don't recognize God's scheme of things and as those who still have the old sinful flesh hanging around? How doe the commandments guide us?

Paul addresses some specific questions. A believer is married to an unbeliever, probably a relationship where they were both formerly unbelievers. Should the believer remain in the marriage? What about those who were not married, should they marry at all? Should the widowed remarry? Then there were the betrothed, should they stay betrothed (and there was no sexually relationship between the betrothed) or should they go ahead

and marry? Many questions arise in this wobbly world. God's Word has not changed, situations in which it is applied do change somewhat. What's the answers?

Paul answers all these questions here in 1 Corinthians 7. Some he answers directly from the Lord's commandments, "To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband...and the husband should not divorce his wife." (vs 10, 11) To others not direct word is given, but sanctified advice, "Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgement as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. (vs 25)

God's law is all about how to live here in this wobbly world, those who live under a scheme that is passing. Again, the motivation is love. As God loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:11) In your love for your brothers and sisters in Christ you gave of your resources so Paul Kon and I could go to South Sudan. They extended their love to you as they cared for me on the days of my sickness. We love one another and thus do fulfill the law of Christ.

Paul reminds us that the scheme under which we now live is passing. We have to understand this to understand the words of Paul. He says those who have wives should live as though they had none. This is not a call for unfaithfulness. He directs those who mourn as though they were not mourning and those rejoicing as though they were not. This is not a prescription to be cold and uncaring. And finally he says those who deal with the world should be as those who have no dealing. He is not saying it's time to drop all and seek the monastery. "The appointed time has grown short...for the present form of this world is passing away." He is saying this too will pass.

Yes, the old nature which pulls us down will be no more. The old foe who plays the old nature will be in the lake of fire never to escape as will be those who heeded his call.

There they will receive what they have been wanting, life away from God. The time of tears and sorrow will pass as there will be no sin and no death. But we will also see the passing of the good for the better. The marriage scheme of one man and one woman is not part of the new heavens and the new earth. Whatever there is will be even better. We enjoy the beauty of creation now, what will be even better, better to the point of the best of the best.

There we, believers, we be a part of that new scheme. We will be there in the presence of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, with the angels and archangels and believers from every tribe and language and people and nations. There will be walk the banks of the river of life picking and enjoying the fruit of the tree of life which will come in 12 varieties, one for every month.

To remember this is encouraging. It is wobbly in this present scheme, a wobbliness not from God, but from sin, but this is not the final scheme. We rejoice that we can be together here today in a little sampling of the final scheme as those at the banquet table of Christ. We are happy that our Lord has come to be among us and that He will come to us in a few minutes in a way we taste, touch, take in.

We walk after our Lord now as His servants in joy and confidence looking for the guide of His word for the steady step in this wobbly world. As God's Word does not pass we are confident this passing scheme gives way to the lasting form. For Jesus' sake. Amen