

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 20, 2017

Text: Romans 11:1-21, 13-15, 28-32
Theme: "Lesson Alignment"

There is a big alignment event tomorrow, a total solar eclipse. It is the first one to be visible in the continental United States in 38 years. It is all about alignment. The moon will be aligned between the sun and the earth. It will cast its shadow upon the earth. The part of the earth in total shadow is only about 70 miles wide. We will be about 120 miles south of that. The place where the shadow will linger the longest is not far from here. In Carbondale, Illinois, the darkness will last for two minutes and 40 seconds. So says NASA on such things. We are not to look at the happenings with the naked eye. It's never a good idea to look directly at the sun. You can do it with these cool glasses courtesy of Hilltop Eyecare. The darkest moment for us will be about 1:20 pm.

Alignment, today's theme is about alignment, lesson alignment. The Old Testament and the Gospel lesson nearly always align as the OT lesson is chosen to match the Gospel. The epistle lesson is usually off doing its own thing. The idea is to read through chunks of the epistles as we have been doing with the longest epistle, Paul's letter to the church at Rome. Today there is alignment also in our epistle lesson as we see God desires all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Our text shows God at work in line with that desire.

We are all journeying through life. With what do we align? Paul speaks of two groups on the journey. There are the descendants of Abraham according to the flesh (Israelite of verse 1) and then there are everybody else, all other peoples, Jews and Gentiles for short. I show that with this cardboard box. The bigger compartment is for the Gentiles as there are more of them. Then the smaller for the Jews. So I populate each section with Lego people. My placement is rather arbitrary. That is unlike what we read of God in Acts 17:26, “And He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.”

So there they are, here we are. How do we align ourselves in life? What path will we walk? God has not left Himself without witness. There is what is sometimes called general revelation or the natural knowledge of God. That’s what this light represents as it shines on all. This happens through creation and through conscience. Paul writes of both in Romans. “For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world.” (Romans 1:20) Then of conscience we read, “They are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness...” (Romans 2:14b, 15a) God has left no one in alignment darkness. There is a path to walk—do this, but not that.

Israel according to the flesh has more light. What we sometimes call special revelation, His written revelation. Paul refers to these, “the oracles

of God” (3:2), “the written code” (2:27), the “giving of the law” (9:4) The light was all the brighter for them on the right path, right alignment. The plan was that by their walking on the path they would be a draw, a light to the nations around them. God has left no one in the darkness.

But the old nature, the sinful nature, wants to find its own path, one matching desire. Israel had a long, crooked, out of alignment history. They had often run after other gods. Already while Moses was up on the mountain receiving more light, they were dancing in the dark around the golden calf. Paul refers to Elijah’s lament centuries after that event, “Lord, they have killed Your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.” (11:3) The path of their history was littered with the ruins of injustice and lack of mercy toward the weakest among them.

At the time of our Lord Jesus there were those who thought they were super aligned. Paul had been one of them. He had been zealous for the tradition of the fathers, been a persecutor of those who wanted to align behind Christ. This was a righteousness built on keeping the law as seen through the knot hole of tradition they had constructed around the light of God’s revelation. So it was with Israel according to the flesh.

How is it in the bigger compartment? In chapters 1, 2, 3 Paul makes the case that all are out of alignment. Despite what may be our best efforts or attempts as self-justification we were still stumbling in the dark. It is as Paul tells us in chapter 3, “For we have already charged that all, both Jews

and Greeks, are under sin.” (vs 9) “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (3:23)

We were stumbling and fallen and there was no escaping, no getting out. Paul writes that we were consigned to disobedience (11:32) (locked up, *sune, kleisen, unenliven*). By nature those more pleased to walk in the light of our own darkness than God’s light. But God had something better in store, much better, kept safe for the better. He has had mercy on us all.

Our realignment according to our desire well that means we were out of line, but God changes things. The Gospel is the good news of realignment. Paul tells us he is not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ (nor could we ever be) for it is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe, first for the Jew and also to the Greek (Romans 1:16).

The Gospel proclaims we are justified freely as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (3:24). The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (6:23b) Jesus frees. Jesus unlocks. His work is two-fold. First of all His is perfect obedience. He was always in alignment with the will of the Father. He fulfills all the law and the prophets. And His is perfect atonement, full payment for our sins, perfect satisfaction of God’s justice. He was put to death for our transgressions and raised for our justification (Romans 4:25) For if many died through the one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of the one man Jesus Christ, abounded for many.” (Romans 5:15b)

God is working, aligning all for good. He does desire all to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4) Yes, we do have

lesson alignment. In our OT lesson from Isaiah 56 we read, "...soon my salvation will come...and the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD...these I will bring to my holy mountain." (vs 1, 6, 7)

God is, has been, always has been at work, to bring His salvation. There is rejection yet He works that also for good. His Son came to His own and His own received Him not, and uses that rejection to bring about the offering, the perfect offering for sin at the cross. "Their rejection means the reconciliation of the world." (11:14) Paul puts it before us, "Just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy." (11:30, 31)

Paul writes of a little Gospel jealousy. The Gospel is of the Jews and goes first of all to the Jews. The law was to go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:3) Disciples were to be made of all nations. Jews are the first to believe. The apostles were Jews. Those 120 gathered in Jerusalem awaiting the pouring out of the Spirit were Jews. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, was a Jew. Jesus tells the woman who comes to Him for help in the region of Tyre and Sidon that He had been "sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." (Matthew 15:24) He had been working among Israel according to the flesh at that time. He had gone up into the region of Tyre and Sidon maybe to get away from the crowds in Israel. Yet He does meet her request. He doesn't send her away as the disciples were pleading for Him to do (Matthew 15:23) He even

commends her for her faith. His initial words to her were probably a way to draw words of faith from her, words that would make an impression on His disciples.

Yes salvation is of the Jews and goes out first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. God would not let rejection by the Jews keep the message from the Gentiles, actually He makes use of it. In Antioch Pisidia after Paul's second week in the synagogue there and rejection there by many of the Jews of the message, Paul says, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you have thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles." (Acts 13:46) Paul tells his Gentile readers here in our text that the Jews were enemies of God for their sake (vs 28); that is, God used that rejection to bring the Gospel to them.

And now Paul says God will use it the other way also, this Gospel jealousy idea. "I magnify my ministry (honor it, do it well, this ministry to the Gentiles) in order to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them." (vs 14) Paul says the mercy to you (Gentiles) will be an opportunity (when the Jews see the result of that mercy) for them to receive mercy. The unbelieving Jews according to the flesh take notice.

Paul writes, "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." (vs 29) This could be, maybe should be, translated, "unregretted," "unrepented of." (avmetame, lhtoj, ametameletos) The rejection of the call is sorrowful for God, yet He never repents of, never is sorry for

calling. He continues to call, always holding out His hands. He will not change the plan midstream.

We read in some of those verses in between our text, “Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.²⁶ And in this way all Israel will be saved...” (vs 25) Here Paul has been using the figure of an olive tree. Unbelieving Jews had been broken off, believing Gentiles grafted in, broken off Jewish branches would be grafted by in when there was faith. In the end, all Israel, that is the tree with both Jewish and Gentile branches would be saved. All Israel are those baptized into Christ, Jew and Gentile, Jew or Gentile, those buried with Christ, raised with Him, children of God by faith, offspring of Abraham and heirs according to the promise.

So what, what does all this mean for us? Is it merely a passing interest like a total eclipse? No, it's more, much more. It is life. We were all out of alignment, all equally guilty, and we are saved the same way, the only way, that Way being Christ. We rejoice knowing there is life eternal and life to be lived right now walking after our Lord. As we walk in our Lord's light we will be light. We look forward to that final day which will be the beginning of the day without end. We look forward to being at the table on our Lord's mountain and saddened to think there will be those outside, locked out forever where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Yes today we do have lesson alignment. We rejoice at God's aligning. God shines the light on His plan that we may believe, live, and share the news of the alignment with more. For Jesus' sake. Amen