

Above and Beyond: "Living Beyond our Imagination"

Biblical Text: Ephesians 3:14-21

Dr. Michael F. Gardner, Senior Pastor

Old Mission United Methodist Church, Fairway, Kansas

Introduction:

There are some Biblical promises that I have built my life upon. God has written them across the years of my life and engraved them on my heart.

Philippians 4:13: ***"I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me."***¹

Romans 8:28: ***"In all things, God works for good for those who love him, and are called according to his purpose."***²

Ephesians 3:20: ***"God is able to do exceedingly, abundantly, more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us."***³

I am convinced that these promises of God are true. I am also convinced that people today need them more than ever.

Long ago, the late Robert Kennedy quoted an old Chinese proverb as saying, ***"May you live in interesting times."***⁴ While the Chinese source is doubtful, the sentiment is true. We do live in interesting times.

On the one hand, our faith tells us that these days are full of promise and potential. God is not limited by whatever challenges we face as a nation, in our economy or our personal lives. But these are also fear-filled times.

Super-storm Sandy turned lives upside down for millions. *Who knew that living in KC, in tornado alley, would be the epicenter of calm?* This week I am particularly glad to be living safe in Kansas City! *(Of course, our prayers go out to those on the East Coast and in the Caribbean.)*

But it is not just hurricanes, power outages, and natural disasters that drive us into anxiety and fear. We don't need disaster to feel those things. Is anyone anxious about the outcome of the election Tuesday? No, of course not, no anxiety there! No fear about our future! ***Of course there is.***

¹ Philippians 4:13, paraphrased by the author from many versions, including the *New King James Version*.

² Romans 8:28, paraphrased by the author from many versions, including the *New International Version*.

³ Ephesians 3:20, paraphrased by the author from the *King James Version*.

⁴ Day of Affirmation Address by Robert F. Kennedy, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa, June 6, 1966

Someone described our time as *"The Information Age"* – and that's probably true, but I think even more, we are living in the *"Age of Anxiety."*

And it's not just the "cares of the world" that weigh us down. We worry about the future of the institutions we love - our Church, college, seminary, business, neighborhood, state, nation. We worry about our own economic security, our children or grandchildren, our future, our past – you pick.

A wise family systems practitioner who has been my mentor for many years says there are only four basic emotions, "sad, mad, glad and scared" – and those can really be reduced to two, *"glad and scared."*⁵

And we are not operating at our best when we are scared and anxious.

That's probably why Philippians 4:6-7 has this word from the Lord for us:

"⁶ Be anxious in nothing, but in everything pray, make your needs known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."⁶

Though the times in which we live are interesting, difficult, and even fearful, God's promises are not shaken by circumstance or displaced by fear!

He whispers to our anxious hearts, ***"My grace is sufficient for you."***⁷

He says, "Trust in me. I am enough." ***"I am enough."***

The Series:

I have committed the next four weeks of our teaching ministry to looking at God's promises in this new series called, *"Above and Beyond."*

It also is the month in which we are making personal faith decisions about our financial commitment for 2013 as a Church family. I could not have planned a more dramatic illustration about how God provides if we trust in Him, than the call I received yesterday. I was just overwhelmed with the news of an anonymous \$10,000 matching gift from one of our members to help us provide a gift of abundance for disaster relief on the East Coast!

⁵ Rev. Bill Selby of the Center for Pastoral Effectiveness of the Rockies.

⁶ Philippians 4:6-7, paraphrased by the author.

⁷ II Corinthians 12:9, paraphrased by the author.

How fitting, how powerful, an illustration of today's Scripture from Ephesians 3:14-21, in which Paul says this:

“God is able to do exceedingly, abundantly, more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.”⁸

Like most of us, those words have taken on deep meaning for me in times of challenge and grief and loss. In those moments, the ones that brought me to my knees, I get my eyes off what I can do and reach for what God can do.

We need to remember that God is more powerful than anything we face! But that is God's good news not just for times of crisis and challenge but in all times! Why do we wait for those times to trust in Him?

Our God is a God of abundance, a God of overflowing grace and blessing. And He desires to pour His blessing into your life in an exceeding abundant way. He is able to do more for you than you can ever ask or think possible.

The phrase *“exceedingly, abundantly”* in our Scripture is the Greek *“hyper-ek-perissos”* which means super-abundantly. More than we need, more than we can even dream about, above and beyond our expectations.

In weeks to come, we will look at Scripture after Scripture that affirms this promise of God. God is able to do exceedingly abundantly more than we can ask or even imagine! **That's the Good News! Thanks be to God!**

The problem is that few of us really, really believe that! On Sundays we sing and pray as if everything depends on God. But when we leave Church, most of us live as if everything depends on us. When most of us look at the world, when we think of our circumstances, when we talk about life with our friends and family, we rarely leave room for God to work!

In his book, Connecting with God, Herb Miller tells the story of a nightclub that opened in a small town. The only church in town organized an all-night prayer meeting, asking God to close down the nightclub. Within a few minutes lightning struck and the club burned to the ground. The owner sued the church. The church denied all responsibility.

⁸ Ephesians 3:20, paraphrased by the author from the *King James Version*.

After hearing both sides, the judge said, ***“It seems that wherever the guilt may lie, the nightclub owner believes in God, while the church doesn't.”***⁹

What do you believe? How much room is there in your heart and life for the work of God that exceeds all your expectations? Would it change your life if you increased your faith, and began to expect, believe great things from God who has promised to exceed our expectations? I think it would.

The Text:

Our Bible text today is known as Paul’s prayer for the Christians at Ephesus, but it could have been his prayer for us. There is no small praying here. He pulls out all the stops. He pushes language to its limits and beyond. He goes to amazing lengths to help us see the enormity of God's provision for us.

His prayer is not about what we are going to promise to do for God or what situation we need to get out of just now. **Both of those have a place in prayer, but they are not here.** This prayer is about who we are in God and what we need to know, to grasp, to comprehend, to understand the fullness of God’s power and blessing for those who trust and believe.

The prayer is broken out into three specific petitions.

The first, verse sixteen, is that we will be strengthened in our inner being with power through the Holy Spirit.

The second, verse seventeen, is that Christ will dwell in our hearts by faith, as we are rooted and grounded in love.

The third petition, verse eighteen, is that we may comprehend the immense dimensions of the love of Christ. Notice that he spells out four dimensions – the ***“breadth and length and height and depth.”*** God’s purpose is that we may be filled with all the fullness of God’s provision.

None of this is about what we are going to do for God, but rather it is about all that God has promised to do in and for us. If we truly trusted in that, it would change how we live. And it would change how we give.

⁹ Herb Miller, Connecting with God: 14 Ways Churches Can Help People Grow, Copyright © 1994, Abington Press.

Paul's prayer ends with an ascription of praise to God, which like everything else in this prayer, presses and reaches for expansive language.

I think it is the very highest of truths in this prayer when Paul reminds us: ***“God is able to accomplish exceedingly, abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.”*** We need to hear that. We need to believe that.

I don't want to stand before God someday and have God ask me, **“Why didn't you open your life to more of my glory, more of my power, more of my provision, more blessing, more joy, more peace, more justice and righteousness. Why didn't you trust in me? I'm able to do abundantly far more than anything you could ever ask or imagine. You kept asking me to fill a thimble when I wanted to fill a barrel.”**

God can do exceedingly, abundantly more than we imagine. **He is able!**
Are you facing mountains in your life? **He is able to move mountains.**
Do you want a more robust future for Old Mission? **He is able.**
Do you worry about where the resources will come from? **Trust in Him.**
Do you look at the world with worry and fear? **God is able! Trust in him!**

There is a great power at work in you and in the world and at Old Mission Church whose name is God! And God is able to make a way out of no way, and transform all our dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows.

Thanks be to God! He is able!