

God's Bold Accessibility Plan

"[Christ Jesus our Lord], in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him"
Ephesians 3:12

If you came through the interior, east side entrance of Emmanuel, you walked right past a plaque. This plaque is displayed directly across from the T.V. at the bottom of the stairs, where many of you typically take the opportunity to greet Pastor Eggold or myself following a service. Some of you may remember what this plaque is about. Others of you are new enough to Emmanuel that you might not know this plaque's story. The plaque serves as a reminder of the dedication of the building in which hangs, Ebenezer. Nearly eleven years ago, Ebenezer was established for use for the ministries of Emmanuel and now for nearly all of us, we couldn't imagine Emmanuel without this space!

As with any project, the final product, in our case Ebenezer, is the culmination of numerous plans, research and thought about what is needed most and how best to meet those needs. Well, this process that was completed in 2012, began with reflection many years prior, certainly back to the early 2000's. And one of the biggest needs that came to light, was how inaccessible the church was to so many individuals, who, for a variety of reasons, struggled to navigate stairs. This concern of accessibility became a driving force in Emmanuel's renovation plans. With the 150th anniversary quickly approaching for the church, a committee was formed in order to pursue the best plan of attack for Emmanuel's accessibility plan.

Well, as the story goes, this committee did their due diligence. They began by exploring the grandest of options and then slowly worked their way back to possibilities that might be more realistic for the church at that time. Ultimately, this committee narrowed things down to two options: a very effective, realistic plan that incorporated a chair lift to give people access through the interior, east doors or a much bolder plan that included an elevator as a main piece of the new building. Since most of you are familiar with Ebenezer, you already know that the congregation of Emmanuel voted to go forward with the bolder plan and thus Emmanuel's bold accessibility plan developed into the Ebenezer building we make such frequent use of in the present!

Emmanuel Lutheran Church isn't the only place that has embarked on a bold, accessibility plan. There have been many before and there will be many to come. However, with this idea of a bold, accessibility plan in mind, I want you to consider this not with man-made organizations and buildings, but with God and His kingdom. This weekend, we celebrate Epiphany - God making Himself known in the person of Jesus not only as the King of Israel, but also as the King of Gentiles, and even more so, the King of the whole world! Perhaps another way for us to consider this Epiphany celebration, is that we recognize and give thanks for God's bold accessibility plan for our sake.

As you may remember, since Adam and Eve's fall into sin, confident, secure and safe access to God was destroyed. So, God began to promise a bold, accessibility plan to fix and correct this disastrous state humanity was now in. As the Lord proclaimed this promise to generation after generation, He made it clear that the Promised One to come would be for all people. Even as God selected His chosen people from Abraham and his family line, He was clear that this selection of soon-to-be Israelites was for the benefit of all people. In other words, even the means that God used to enact His bold, accessibility plan were for the sake of the whole world not just a select group of people.

And over the years, Israel struggled to remember their purpose in God's accessibility plan. When God told them to do one thing for His plan, they did another. From military conquests, to sacrifices, to leadership, Israel really seemed to muck up God's bold, accessibility plan. Yet, thanks be to God, His plan moved forward despite all of Israel's struggles and from a defeated and humiliated nation, God still brought forth Jesus, the One promised from the moment Adam and Eve and all of humanity fell into sin. Unlike, the rest of Israel's troubled history with God's plan, Jesus, God in the flesh, carried out this bold, accessibility plan to perfection. From Jesus' life, death and resurrection, God's bold, accessibility plan was in place with the fullness of this plan's impact to be realized when Jesus returns again. And this unhindered access to God

the Father that Jesus has delivered is what led Paul to exclaim in our second reading, “... **in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him**” (*Ephesians 3:12*).

Paul’s statement is so powerful. Yet, it’s our tendency to try and render this truth powerless. We’re resistant to the direct access Jesus gives us to God. We try to insert something in addition to Jesus. Sometimes it’s our own works. We think that we can use the law as a step by step process to prove our worthiness to God. However, we can never handle all those steps as well as we need to. We have to bypass the steps of God’s law to become worthy in His sight and our only way around those steps is Jesus!

Other times it’s other people who become our addition to Jesus. Church bodies have a history of lifting up certain saints in order to gain access to answers for specific needs from God even though Jesus has already turned God’s ear to us without their help. We also do this with other devout people in our lives. We raise them up as people closer to God because of their religious sincerity and yet the truth remains that through faith in Jesus, God is equally close to any of us. In our attempts get whatever advantage with God we can, we can quickly cover up the bold access that Jesus has already achieved for us.

Now there’s the other side of the coin too, when we try to lessen the power of Paul’s statement through subtraction. Taking advantage of the bold access that Jesus provides, we try to cut out things we no longer see as necessary to our faith. Sometimes we do this with the gifts Jesus instituted to deliver this bold, unhindered access to God’s favor until He returns. We subtract God’s critical work from Baptism and turn this gift into our work that we must continue to do over and over again until we get it just right! We take away Jesus’ real presence from the Lord’s Supper and turn this gift into merely a reminder overlooking the forgiveness, life and salvation God’s Word tells us is included.

This subtraction happens with church too. We can take God’s bold accessibility plan in Jesus to mean that we don’t need other people for our faith journey – even people that God has put in place to be helpful for our faith walk this side of heaven. It can be tempting to think that church workers are no longer needed because Jesus gives us direct access to God. Or that we don’t need to meet together with others in a community of like believers because we already have that personal relationship with Jesus which is what really matters. But falling into this trap, removes God-given people who aren’t there to interfere with God’s bold, accessibility plan through Jesus, but to help to encourage, support and help make known God’s plan here in this time and place.

Yes, God’s bold accessibility plan through Jesus is so powerful on its own! We don’t need to add or subtract to it and yet we all have tinkered with God’s plan in some way. Our thoughts, words and actions have also mucked up God’s plan and yet thanks be to Jesus, He continues to carry out this plan perfectly despite our attempted additions and subtractions. Because of Jesus’ continued work in our lives, we get to witness the power of this plan daily renewed in our lives and the lives of those around us. By the forgiveness Jesus died to win for sinners like us, we get to receive the power of God’s bold, accessibility plan once again as He unites, repentant sinners, like you and me, through His mercy and grace.

As recipients of this powerful plan, we are also representatives of God’s bold, accessibility plan. You and I, our lives, are living proof of what God is accomplishing. God is continuing an epiphany-like revelation through our lives so that His bold, accessibility plan in Jesus might be made known to those around us! And as God reveals His saving plan in and through our lives, we get to share the personal touches He has used to make His plan known to us. Maybe it’s our church family, maybe it’s our own personal family’s heritage of faith, maybe’s our church workers, maybe’s our Bible study group or choir friends, maybe it’s a specific passage or hymn, whatever it might be for you in this moment, may it be a refreshing reminder of God’s bold accessibility plan through Jesus, His ongoing epiphany work, in your lives and the lives of those around you. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan